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_Preservation: Resonance of the Actual_
_- an investigation of the phenomenon of ‘on-the-road’ photography_

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Can photographic images of everyday scenes and landscapes (elements overlooked or ignored), change audience's perceptions of their environments? And how can this photographic practice reinvent itself out of the powerful influence of American 'on-the-road' photography?
ABSTRACT

Preservation: Resonance of the Actual refers to fundamental questions and explorations regarding the phenomenon of ‘on-the-road’ photography and the impact of photographers who practice it in their role of depicting society. These central ideas underpin all aspects of my research, studio based and theoretical.

Firstly, I discuss the projects that comprise my MFA practical work, within the framework of three field trips, one to the US exploring notions of being an outsider, another field trip focusing on my external environments close to home and most recently a trip into landscapes further afield, in western New South Wales. The paper then discusses theories advanced by authors Walter Benjamin, drawing on Charles Baudelaire’s concept of the flâneur and Roland Barthes’ notion of studium and punctum both in relation to my own work and other photographic artists including Walker Evans, William Eggleston and Alec Soth

This research comprises three parts. Firstly, the paper presents an investigation into the theme of ‘on-the-road’ photography, which in turn leads to an analysis of the purpose of photographers’ documentation of everyday scenes. I examine both the historical and contemporary situation, looking at how this has challenged traditional ideas of beauty. Through this research I also question the value society places on the uncommissioned photographic archive, and the worth it finds contained within.

Lastly, I explore the impact of curator and writer John Szarkowski, as well as photographers Paul Graham, Stephen Shore, Zoe Leonard, and Trent Parke. These artists have been a source of inspiration for much of my work and create a framework against which I can assess my own output and reflect on different elements of my practice.
INTRODUCTION

I drive, I walk, I pause, I photograph, I move on.

The abstract notion and authentic experience of the journey is central to my work, and hence central in my life. My project, which is presented as an exhibition and exegesis titled *Preservation: Resonance of the Actual*, is an exploration and investigation of the phenomenon of ‘on-the-road’ photography. This paper highlights the conceptual and temporal terrain in which photographers of influence and accomplishment, who are like-minded to myself, have worked in to either intentionally or unintentionally create precious archives and unique documents which reflect the life, times and culture they live. I have identified the practice of certain historical and contemporary photographers who have been integral to the progression and nuance of this genre within the larger medium, which could also be called ‘social documentary’. Writers such as John Szarkowski, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, Marc Auge and Lucy Lippard provide a theoretical context.

In Part One I discuss my methodology: how, why and where I make images. During the period of my research I have conducted field trips both in Australia and in the U.S.A., and I analyse and reflect on the importance of these for my practice. I also provide a context for my new work by explaining the work I have made immediately before, where I have employed both photographic imagery and discrete installation components. Concerns I explore that impact upon my work include notions of trace, the flâneur, and quiet photography.

In Part Two I analyse photographers who travel through landscape to source and create their imagery. Based on John Szarkowski’s concept of ‘mirrors’ and ‘windows’, I explore with historical examples as well as contemporary practitioners the question of whether it is easier, more successful or more valid to
document one’s own immediate environment, culture or community, or conversely, is it in fact easier to be an ‘outsider’ with a more dispassionate viewpoint? I discuss the different ways in which photographers make their imagery, describing and delineating between operating within the ‘real’ world or within a framework closer to a directorial mode. I pinpoint the liminal zones at the margins of cities - the spaces in which they lose form and peter out – and consider why photographers are drawn to recording and exploring these areas. In Part Three I continue by analysing the impact of American writer and curator John Szarkowski, and the hand he played in shaping the direction and opportunities for photographers during his position at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

There are, of course, many photographers who have been influential for me, who provoke a reflection on my practice and whose work tackles different aspects within my area of research. But there are a particular few who bear the closest scrutiny. Eugene Atget and Walker Evans provide a greater historical context, while William Eggleston and Stephen Shore reflect the changing nature of the medium in the 1970s through to now. Alec Soth, Paul Graham, Zoe Leonard, Trent Parke and Glenn Sloggett are the contemporary photographers whose work is most akin and inspirational to my creative interests. In addition to looking at the specific practice of the aforementioned photographers, the paper ends with a discussion of the importance of installation style and presentation in the reading of my photographic images, and how this synchronises with my overall practice.

The period I have worked on the images that have become Preservation: Resonance of the Actual has confirmed for me the value of my instinctive desire to explore, to examine, to photograph in the real world, and to then re-contextualise it, both to enhance my understanding of the ground over which
have trod, and for the consideration of an audience who might be spurred to consider the seemingly familiar world around them anew.
PART ONE – THE ROAD
ON THE ROAD

My research has focused around an integral thread I call “on-the-road” photography. This term loosely refers to ‘road trips’ and journeys, but it also deliberately alludes to Jack Kerouac’s 1951 novel On The Road.¹ Kerouac wrote the introduction to photographer Robert Frank’s seminal photographic book The Americans produced in 1959,² and I believe it has been used in reference to photography since this time. “On-The-Road” photography is a term that is often used but its originating source and concrete definition are difficult to find. For me it’s an amalgamation of elements and themes that already exist in photography. It’s part street photography, part social documentation and part self-referential. Like the ‘road movie’, which documents an epic journey (and its parallel story of the growth of its hero), it bloomed in the 1950s and 1960s, the era of unparalleled automobile production and post war prosperity in America; people were on the move. I define on-the-road photography as imagery made while travelling through landscape, using an identified rationale as one’s guiding compass. The imagery reflects aspects of the photographer’s culture and time. It’s an exploration of the everyday.

The photographic artists I have researched such as Walker Evans, William Eggleston and Alec Soth have a shared vision of the importance of the everyday,

¹ “Jack Kerouac, the novelist who named the Beat Generation and exuberantly celebrated its rejection of middle-class American conventions, died on October 21, 1969, in St. Petersburg, Florida, U.S. He was 47 years old. He wrote in “On the Road,” a novel he completed in only three weeks but had to wait seven years to see published. When it finally appeared in 1957, it immediately became a basic text for youth who found their country claustrophobic and oppressive. At the same time, it was a spontaneous and passionate celebration of the country itself, of “the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent.” Mr. Kerouac’s admirers regarded him as a major literary innovator and something of a religious seer, but this estimate of his achievement never gained wide acceptance among literary tastemakers”. http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/k/jack_kerouac/index.html [accessed: 7.8.2012]

² Todd Papageorge, Core Curriculum, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2011, pg. 64
and in photographically recording this. At different points within the last century their work has advanced this genre, motivated by a myriad of reasons. Whether it be the photographer focusing their lenses on the demise of independently owned shops, the disappearance of a particular trade and changing architecture within a city or suburban landscape, all are ultimately drawing an elegiac picture of the passage of time and the unstoppable nature of change.

Words often used to describe this photographic illustration include; banal, trivial, ordinary, commonplace, democratic, overlooked and ignored. Even if the photographs contain no figurative elements, they always let you know that the human being is the reason they were made. It’s a positive expression of the importance of intimate experience; seeing social meaning in the weight of individual lives, viewed as if from within.

Many years ago, long before I began to study photography I came across an image in an art book that had a huge impact on me. The image was made in the 1960s and it depicted the contents of a domestic freezer. In this one very quiet image I could see the fashionable colours of the time, what food packaging looked like and these ordinary items in the freezer could tell me a little about the person who owned it. Several years later I came across this image again: it was in a book by photographer William Eggleston. I began to understand the context of his work and why a photograph depicting the contents of a freezer was so ground breaking, especially in the 1960s. What that image did for me at the time was validate an area that I was naturally drawn to. It made me think that there was worth and value in exploring this notion: that the themes and concerns that appear trivial to most are actually recording the complexities and richness of life as we know it, right now.

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1 - William Eggleston
Untitled
from the series Troubled Water
execution date: c 1971 / print date: 1980
dye-transfer, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
FIELD TRIP TWO

In April 2011, I participated in an exhibition at Gosford Regional Art Gallery called *Emerging*. It was a competition in which artists aged under 30 within New South Wales were invited to submit a proposal for a body of work, and if selected were then asked to exhibit the work in competition for prize money with seven other artists. I was fortunate enough to be selected and I presented new work titled *That Which Was (never really hidden)*, comprising ten framed works (60 x 60 cm). The images I chose to form this work were all made from locations close to Newcastle, in surrounding areas like Weston, Beresfield and Argenton, places around 30kms outside the city centre.

During the previous twelve months I had been making regular field trips to places like this, shooting film with a Mamiya medium format rangefinder camera. Although I would often bring with me a digital SLR camera, working with the two cameras simultaneously was unnatural and cumbersome. With the Mamiya you are framing things in a square format, always bearing in mind that the colour and contrast of the particular film stock used (Fujicolour REALA) will transcribe the scene in a certain way. With the digital SLR you are shooting with a rectangular format and seeing, reviewing and often deleting the results in an instant, and it has a different colour saturation and contrast than film. Hence, different places and landscapes would suit either of these tools, but rarely both. I really enjoy shooting with film, only ever shooting a particular view once and moving on, knowing that perhaps I had got the shot and maybe I hadn’t.

In making images this way you become detached from the outcome. Instead of obsessively trying to ‘get the shot’, you are completely focused on the frame and

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4 “Through the Biennial Emerging Competition, the Gosford Regional Gallery demonstrates its commitment to providing opportunities for young artists. 2011 is the fifth time the competition has been held. It continues to be a vibrant part of the Gallery’s exhibition program which aims to offer young artists real opportunities to develop their practice.” Tim Braham, Curator Gosford Regional Art Gallery, excerpt from exhibition catalogue foreword. *Emerging 2011*, Gosford Regional Art Gallery, pg.2
the moment; and once it has happened you move on. It’s also a helpful discipline to have an enforced time lag. Weeks can pass by the time you develop and scan the negative to seeing it on screen. This essentially provides critical distance and detachment from the initial moment in which you were compelled to make the photograph, which means you can view it in a new context with fresh perspective and thoughts. Images you had been really enthusiastic about may turn out to be a disappointment, and conversely a frame you were perhaps indifferent to, may yield unexpected results.

The photographs included images of a bridge with a busy road crossing farmland, an old church, a concrete garden ornament of an eagle, flags and bunting from a car yard, a brick double garage home with two parked cars in the driveway, a path cutting through vegetation, a small mixed business shop and an empty billboard standing in a paddock. Many of these elements – paths, empty billboards and brick walls - are recurring motifs that I’m drawn to. Paths through land or vegetation are an organically formed walkway, a signpost to somewhere unofficial or off the delineated and marked way. Gerry Badger considers that the motif of ‘the path’ has frequently been used amongst other analogies as a metaphor for life, employed in generations of church sermons.\(^5\) Billboards are generally an advertising mechanism to capture the attention of passing motorists. Often placed in farming paddocks and isolated locations they can seem oddly out of place, a clash of economics in a rural location. I’m drawn to the ones that have become redundant, no longer in use, completely void of information. I’ve also been photographically fascinated by the possible emblematic qualities of brick walls. Mortared-up cracks in foundations, bricked-in windows and the merging of two-bricked-in walls. For me they speak of trace and evidence, evidence of a past physical or human structure, evidence of land and relationships shifting.

2 - Carla Feltham
Installation image, *That Which Was (never really hidden)*, 2011
Gosford Regional Art Gallery
colour photograph on silver rag paper, each 60 x 60 cm
3 - Carla Feltham
images 1-2 from the series, That Which Was Never Really (hidden), 2011
archival colour photograph on silver rag paper, 60 x 60 cm
3 - Carla Feltham
images 3-4 from the series, That Which Was Never Really (hidden), 2011
archival colour photograph on silver rag paper, 60 x 60 cm
3 - Carla Feltham
images 5-6 from the series, *That Which Was Never Really (hidden)*, 2011
archival colour photograph on silver rag paper, 60 x 60 cm
3 - Carla Feltham
images 7-8 from the series, *That Which Was Never Really (hidden)*, 2011
archival colour photograph on silver rag paper, 60 x 60 cm
3 - Carla Feltham
image #9 from the series, *That Which Was Never Really (hidden)*, 2011
archival colour photograph on silver rag paper, 60 x 60 cm
It can be challenging making photographs in your own immediate environment, slowing down and trying to see things with fresh eyes, things that are part of your own habitus – intimate parts of your own milieu.\(^6\) At the same time there is an ease with which you can wander about and not have too much attention drawn to you. That is why I wanted to explore landscapes and environments close to home. Conversely, the images for my Honours exhibition (field trip one) in 2009, titled *The Revelator*, came from a trip to the U.S.A. In particular they were made in Memphis, Tennessee; the suite of images depicted a humble church, a cemetery, a bus stop, a run-down make-shift diner and a view from a Dunkin’ Donuts drive-through outlet. Early in the following year I exhibited the photographs at the Queensland Centre for Photography. The catalogue essay by photographer Ray Cook noted that:

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\text{This body of work is in the post WWII American documentary tradition in which the social landscape of a culture is mapped on a road trip made by a photographer as a sort of quest for the truth underlying a society’s shiny surfaces. Carla Feltham has travelled through the United States in 2009 balancing intention with chance to capture a human vision of the country in which the lives of its people are reflected in the commonplace roadside scenes that surround them.}^{7}\]

It was indeed, the commonplace that I was seeking – those things that are the insistant reminders of ordinary stories of everyday lives.

An Australian photographer with whose work I feel a great affinity with is Glenn Sloggett (b.1964). Working since the mid 1990s, Sloggett produces images that reflect poignant aspects of suburban life, depicting the quirkiness and sadness that is present, but he does so as an observer who is fully absorbed by his

\(^6\) Habitus is a term used by Pierre Bourdieu to describe “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide.” Wacquant, L, ‘Habitus’ in *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, (Becket, J and Z. Milan), Routledge, London, pg.315
4 - Carla Feltham
Image from installation the series, *The Revelator*, 2009
The University of Newcastle Gallery
colour photograph on silver rag paper, dimensions variable

5 - Glenn Sloggett
666
from the series *Decrepit*, 2006
type c print, 40 x 40 cm
environment; an intimacy is conveyed that speaks on a level that is not judgmental, superior or snide. Wheelie bins, sprayed graffiti messages, a diseased rose, a wedding dress in an op-shop window, a marked cross by a tree; these are the kinds of things that appear in his work. Shot front on, often with a flash bulb reflected or evident in the image, Sloggett’s photographs aren’t pretty and can appear deceptively simplistic. Australian curator Robert Cook says that, “He creates an intensely resonant emotional language from a set of reference points dead to others.”

The titles of his bodies of work again convey a complexity of subject matter that could be seen as both humorous and bleak; *Cheaper & Deeper, Abandon, Lost Man, Decrepit, Morbid, A White Trash (Lost) Love.* So many of the things that appear in Sloggett's images are things I am also attracted to, brick-walls, graffiti, shop signage & displays, gravesites and detritus. And also like him, my images are devoid of people. Depopulated scenes with only evidence of previous activity remaining. Australian artist and academic Anne Ferran observes that:

> All the photographs by Glenn Sloggett are empty of people. This simple observation brought home to me the fact that virtually all the contemporary photographs I am most drawn to are ones, where against expectation, there is nobody there. There are rather a lot of them, amounting almost but not quite to a phenomenon.

Ferran’s observation draws attention to the potential potency of photographic images despite them not containing the gaze of ‘another’. When a figure is not present in an image there is a freedom or permission for the audience to move about the image freely and assign value to any aspect that resonates with them. It psychologically changes the dynamic from the viewer being shown something, to being invited to look for something. This is not, of course, to say that a figurative element debases an image, but merely that in a primal way one’s eyes

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10 Anne Ferran, *Empty*, Photofile, 2002, Australian Centre for Photography, Paddington, NSW, pg.5
are drawn straight to it in the first instance, and you are consciously or unconsciously, and unavoidably, connecting with that human presence.

OUT WEST – FIELD TRIP THREE

In April 2011, I spent two weeks in western New South Wales. I wanted to conduct this research trip as I spent my adolescence growing up there, but have subsequently lived in Newcastle for over a decade. The landscape out west is familiar to me yet there is a distance and clarity with which I can see it and its particularities now, which if I had never left I would probably be blind to. I also wanted to explore elements and places that were removed from the city, a different aesthetic. I was principally visiting Dubbo and related locations as part of a research trip, but the opportunity arose to go much further afield to Broken Hill, and I considered it would be the perfect chance to experience an extreme landscape, one that is seldom represented photographically in a non-traditional or non-commercial way. The first part of my trip was the drive from Newcastle to Dubbo (400km) and then Dubbo to Broken Hill (750km). Although I spent all of my high school years living in Dubbo I had never ventured further west than Dubbo itself.

Wednesday 13th April (diary entry)

I leave Dubbo at sunrise, anxious to hit the road, as I know the drive will take about seven hours and I want to have enough time be able to stop along the way if I see anything that pricks my interest. I’m excited because I haven’t done a long drive of more than 4 or 5 hours for ages and it’s a totally new route and terrain, so not knowing what to expect is great.

During the drive to Broken Hill I passed through lots of little towns that had a very familiar look and feel, but after travelling through Cobar (300kms west of Dubbo) the landscape dramatically changed into flat plains, with only low lying scrub as far as the eye can see. This part of the journey continued for two or three hours - red earth either side of the road, flattened landscape all the way out to the
6 - Carla Feltham  
Barrier Highway, near Cobar, NSW  
colour photograph (documentation), 2011

7 - Carla Feltham  
Barrier Highway, near Wilcannia, NSW  
colour photograph (documentation), 2011
horizon. It was a completely new experience to feel so surrounded by land. It was strangely claustrophobic, but also calming and meditative, as the road stretched out in front of me, converging into a tiny dot in the distance.

**Wednesday 13th April 2011 (diary entry)**

>*Driving into Cobar I notice little flocks of goats on the side of the road and just off the distance in the scrub. I find that kind of curious, not knowing if a farmer has them grazing or if they are actually wild. Stopping to get fuel in Cobar I notice a typed sign on the pin-board with a price for goats per kilo, so the mystery is sort of solved but I’m not sure who is eating the goats.*

*I arrive at Broken Hill late in the afternoon and after checking into my motel I’m keen to explore the city with the remaining daylight. The main street is quite large really with bakeries, pubs, banks and retail shops. Down one end of the street is a surreal scene, a gigantic ornate two storey pub wrapping around a corner with ornate lace work veranda, down one side of the pub only 200m away is a towering mine with a train track running in front of it. It’s such a strange imposing view.*

I spent four days in Broken Hill, walking around the shopping precinct and residential streets, and visiting the imposing old mine that looms above all in the middle of town. I also visited the tiny nearby village of Silverton (population 60) and its cemetery, just out of town.\[^{11}\] Still in use, the cemetery was a hostile environment of wild vegetation, thorns, weeds, paddy melons, and of course more red dirt. I found Broken Hill fascinating, but other places I stopped at on the way home, like Wilcannia and White Cliffs, were more interesting to me. I think this was because they are smaller, they felt more authentic as they rarely cater for tourists, only partly functional and partly in ruin. Also very small, like Silverton, Wilcannia had a mix of beautiful old sandstone buildings, but also shops made from corrugated iron, some still in use and others boarded up. It was a strange amalgamation of abandoned grandeur and haphazard functionality, as if half the town had packed up and left decades earlier.

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8 - Carla Feltham
Community notice board, Cobar, NSW
colour photograph (documentation), 2011
White Cliffs was about 100kms off my route home but as I was so far out west already and didn’t know when I would be there again I thought it was worth spending the extra time to visit it. A tiny opal-mining village, White Cliffs is notable, not only for opals, but also because a large portion of the population live underground in houses called ‘dug-outs’.  

**Sunday 17th April 2011 (diary entry)**

Driving into White Cliffs I stop on the road for a group of five or six emus that are ambling over the road. They seem to pause, glare at me and then carry on. It was exciting to see, it’s the first time I’ve seen wild emu up close. Being out in the wide expanse and feeling a part of nature or at least feeling vulnerable to it is terrifying yet humbling.

I stop in the middle of White Cliffs and park out the front of the pub and head into the corner store for breakfast. The store is a post office; a take away joint, a convenience store and serves as the community noticeboard. Coffee is a giant urn with an equally giant tin of instant coffee, you have as many cups as you like for two dollars.

The landscape was desolate, with hundreds of small chalky white mounds created from the mining spoil. It is also incredibly isolated, situated on a road that doesn’t lead directly to anywhere else. Its civic and commercial infrastructure consisted of a school, a pub and a corner store. Standing at the highest point of the town you could look around and see all the mining holes, as well as the buses and caravans that people live in, either above ground or semi-submerged beneath the earth. Both Wilcannia and White Cliffs were totally unique landscapes, unlike anything I had ever seen before.

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12 “White Cliffs - known for its Opal Mining - is an extraordinary place with most of the town living in underground dwellings called dugouts. The White Cliffs Underground Motel is built mostly underground providing you with an opportunity to share a unique lifestyle - sleeping underground is a unique experience. Dugouts are so-called because they are dug in the rock. Regardless of the heat of the Australian outback, dugouts enjoy a constant 22°C temperature all year round. They are perfectly dry, well ventilated and environmentally sound as there is never the need to use a heater or air-conditioning.” http://www.visitnsw.com/destinations/outback-nsw/white-cliffs-area/white-cliffs/accommodation/white-cliffs-underground-motel [accessed: 7.8.2012]
9 - Map of NSW
Photographically I am not interested in the picturesque. The aesthetic and things I’m interested in documenting aren’t, for example, charming old timber buildings and tin sheds. I’m not after a sentimental appeal, like an image of a collapsing wool shed at sunset. Rather, I want to document elements of now, or things that have been recently in use. Often things you see and get excited about just don’t translate to an image the way you would want them to, and also don’t work or sit well with the other photographs you have made. Because I am never quite sure what I will find, or indeed quite sure what I am looking for, it can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint things that make sense together and the things that don’t.

Helen Ennis has observed that:

"The attraction of landscape sites close to home is relatively easy to explain but the lack of a strong tradition of exploration or expedition photography is another matter. In contrast to the United States, where photography went hand in hand with the opening up of the American frontier, in Australia it did not."

This observation is very pertinent. While the epic landscapes of photographers like Timothy O’Sullivan, William Henry Jackson and Carlton Watkins played a large role in firing nineteenth century America’s imagination and desire for the unconquered west, the similarly vast Australian frontier, being explored at roughly the same time, seems largely hidden. Contemporarily, there is a lack of real social landscape photography within Australia that has explored regional

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15 “While these photographers imaged the "social landscape" of America in the 1960s, others like Robert Adams (born 1937) addressed the actual outdoor landscape. In works such as *Outdoor Theater, Colorado Springs* (1971.531.6), mankind's incursion into the natural world becomes a blatant threat to the integrity of the nation's natural resources—a dangerous situation not because it is a deliberate campaign of destruction but because it is the product of developmental forces (such as the popularity of drive-in movies) that, if left unfettered, will envelop everything in their path. Adams' work was included in a seminal 1975 exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester entitled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, along with other contemporary landscape photographers including Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Stephen Shore." *The New Documenty Tradition in Photograpy*, Lisa Hostetler, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ndoc/hd_ndoc.htm [accessed: 22.8.2012]
10 - Carla Feltham
Silverton cemetery, NSW
colour photograph (documentation), 2011

11 - Carla Feltham
White Cliffs, NSW
colour photograph (documentation), 2011
areas or places outside of major cities. Beyond city dwellings into the outback there are numerous photographers producing images for a tourist market, depicting red earth and red sunsets, but for Australians this is a romanticised vision of the outback, or at least it looks that way to anyone that has visited there. This is not to say that such imagery isn’t sometimes incredibly beautiful, but it’s closer to a glossy calendar depiction than it is to reality, and it says little of the people that actually inhabit these places.

Contemporary photographer Trent Parke (b.1971) is a rare example of an Australian artist practicing in the area of social landscape photography, whose imagery is very much grounded in exploring not only cityscapes and suburban life but also regional areas of Australia. In 2003 and 2004 he spent two years travelling around Australia making black and white images of the places he visited. They are high contrast photographs, sometimes grainy and blurry, sometimes sharp, and they convey an urgency or life force at the fore. The series of work he created titled, Minutes to Midnight (2003-2004) depicts Australia with scenes like a crowd gathered on a beach looking into the horizon as a shark alarm has gone off, towels drying on a washing line in a caravan park, a portrait of a hunting dog and moths around a light at night. The images are gritty yet retain a poetic elegance. Writer Geoff Dyer articulates the sense of these images.

*With their starkness and intense expressivity some of the photographs in Minutes to Midnight are reminiscent of work by Michael Ackerman. Like Ackerman, Parke is interested in the emotional or psychological contours of a scene or event.*

The notion of this trip and what Parke was able to capture and reveal are in many ways similar to Robert Frank’s journey and subsequent seminal 1958 photo-book

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The Americans. By travelling and placing himself within various communities and events, Parke is able to show viewers that life is different within regional areas and beyond. It’s not the romantic red dust vision but real people living real life, with all its banalities, routines and difficulties and it sheds light on the peculiarities and nuances of a different environment.

When I returned from the far west of NSW I spent the remaining part of my field trip based in Dubbo. While spending a great deal of time exploring the edges of the city, I also wanted to follow the Macquarie River that runs through Dubbo.\(^{18}\) The river (626km long) starts just before Bathurst near Oberon and travels from there to Burrendong Dam near Wellington, then on through Dubbo and Narromine, and then north of Warren where it loses its form in the Macquarie Marshes, to then empty into the Darling River. The reason I decided to follow the river was that it gave me a loose framework to work within, and because even though I had lived in Dubbo for nine years during school, I had never been to Bathurst, or the dam or Warren. The river had played a big part of my life growing up in Dubbo. It flows through the middle of town, dividing the city, and I had witnessed the river in several periods of drought and flood. Every summer as kids and teenagers we would hang out, swimming and floating on inflated tyre tubes down sections of the river. Like all vast bodies of water it holds secrets beneath and can inflict devastation upon the land and people living near it.

Thursday 21\(^{st}\) April 2011 (diary entry)

In November 2010 the Macquarie River flooded in Dubbo, submerging more than half of the main street for several weeks. I’m visiting five months later, once again the river is was low but evidence of the flood is all around. Twigs and debris are tangled a storey high in the trees along the river, fence lines are full and I can see stumps and trees that had been washed down stream and left in odd places. The pebbles of the riverbed are so compressed and flattened I can imagine the power of the water that flowed through.

12 - Map of the Macquarie River
In some places it was difficult to follow the river as it would wind and change direction, and was cut by roads or farming land. The river’s character changed in each town - the colour of the water, the width of it, the different kinds of vegetation that grew along the banks, and how much of it flowed directly through the various settlements. Burrendong Dam was huge (1,118,000ML at capacity), much larger than I anticipated a massive, an eerily quiet body of water with just a few fishermen in dinghies bobbing in the distance. It was fascinating to follow the river through unknown towns because in Dubbo the same water is so familiar. I know exactly where it goes and the places to gain access to it, but in the other towns it was all unfamiliar.

While I was driving I kept with me a list of potential things to photograph. A list I created by looking at, and drawing inspiration from, the photographic books of Walker Evans and Robert Frank, analysing the types of places and visual references that acted as cultural markers. Although I didn’t stick to this list in a strict sense (it wasn’t a checklist) I did use it as a guide or compass for my wanderings. Much as with my method of following the river, it was a useful tool or structure to use. While looking for, say, a general store, I would come across something else interesting along the way. While seeking you must remain entirely open and constantly looking. The initial starting point is just that - an excuse to start moving. In Robert Frank’s Guggenheim Fellowship application (a grant he applied for and received which enabled him to travel around the U.S. by car for two years) he included an extensive list of things he wanted to capture and illustrate, but concluded that “the project I have in mind is one that will shape itself as it proceeds, and is essentially elastic.”

Places or things on my list included:

Sign writing, pubs and bars, parked cars, a general store, rows of houses, a church, a shop window display, a school, a war memorial, petrol stations, a gravesite, a movie poster and a car scrap-yard.

THE EMPTINESS OF TRAVEL, THE FULLNESS OF SPACE

Finding locations to photograph involves intuition, research and chance. I find these places by seeking out spots that I have a hunch might be interesting or because I have glimpsed a place or something en route to somewhere else.

Travelling about making photographs in this way is a quiet, meditative practice. You are on your own, rarely interacting with anyone else except maybe a curious passerby enquiring about what you are photographing. You are intensely looking, and pausing, and stopping and walking on again, gleaning anything of interest. Apart from the decision-making towards the end of producing a body of work (size, scale, paper, installation etc), this is the most exciting and creative part for me -the hunting around for meaningful things, the search for resonant places.

Typically the places I find most interesting are small towns on the fringes of larger cities, but also pockets within larger agglomerations where the use of the land isn’t clearly zoned or defined by current or historical use. Within these larger spaces, what attracts me are the smaller elements that feel oppositional to new concrete rendered buildings, franchised retail outlets, sleek vinyl lettering and neat suburban housing estates. They are elements where utilitarian function is at the fore or where traces of a person and their actions remain. Hand-written shop signs, an old building that is in far from pristine condition but exhibits evidence it’s still cared for, humble shop window displays. They are all the things and places that aren’t signposted as points of interest, but the things that hold an intense interest for me. With the advent of large freeway systems for motor travel, the
small towns and shops that would have serviced travellers have all but disappeared and made way for ubiquitous large service centres that feature franchised food and petrol stations. The sense of ambling and opportunity to find hidden points of interest along the way to an end destination has been erased. My travels are in opposition to this. I’m seeking out the authentic points of difference and uniqueness that can be found in the smaller forgotten places.

Considering the nature of modern day car travel Marc Auge theorises that:

*Motorway travel is thus doubly remarkable: it avoids, for functional reasons, all the principal places to which it takes us; and it makes comments on them. Service stations add to this information, adopting an increasingly aggressive role as centres of regional culture, selling a range of local goods with a few maps and guidebooks that might be useful to anyone who is thinking of stopping.*

**PRESERVATION**

The title for my newest body of work and Masters exhibition is *Preservation* - it relates to the content of my photographs as well as my flower installation that goes with it. It speaks of care and neglect and trying to sustain something over time.

My exhibition will be comprised of photographs made during the past two years, from the previously referred-to field trips close to my home in Newcastle, and my odyssey to western New South Wales.

The main photographic element of the project will be around fifty A3 size colour images printed on silver rag paper. The images depict things such as mining slag, an abandoned drive-in cinema, smoke haze from a fire, a river bend, a

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13 - Carla Feltham
Image from the series, *Preservation*, 2012
colour photograph on silver rag paper, dimensions variable
14 - Carla Feltham
Image from the series, Preservation, 2012
colour photograph on silver rag paper, dimensions variable
15 - Carla Feltham
Image from the series, Preservation, 2012
colour photograph on silver rag paper, dimensions variable
16 - Carla Feltham
Image from the series, Preservation, 2012
colour photograph on silver rag paper, dimensions variable
17 - Carla Feltham
Image from the series, *Preservation*, 2012
colour photograph on silve rag paper, dimensions variable
juvenile detention centre, a grave, shop signage and a car wrecking yard. I've always had a fascination with weeds and photographing them, and out west it became evident to me that paddy melons growing alongside the river banks and in paddocks were everywhere. Originally from South Africa, they can be poisonous to live-stock and spread easily. Two of my images feature paddy melons. Collectively my photographs portray my experiences and elements I have been fascinated with that I have discovered while being on-the-road.

FLOWERS

Over the past five years I have often produced additional installation components to sit alongside my photographs. Past examples include collected conversations from trains and buses displayed in concrete form as well as recreating hand-written signs. The collected conversations reflected the environment and setting from which my photographs came: spending time roaming about the streets of the city and travelling on public transport. As my imagery is devoid of actual people, the collected conversations stand in as a type of non-literal portrait.

In 2007 I wrote down the conversations I overheard while travelling daily on the train in London. When I returned home I decided to cut the letters that formed the sentences out of carpet (this material was chosen because the train was carpeted and absorbed all the comings and goings of the commuters), and wall-mounted the sentences and statements as an individual installation. The block of navy blue carpeted letters created a great visual as well as textual and textural affect. If the viewer chose to read all the sentences they were free to do so, but at the same time they could enjoy the installation on a simple graphic level, or just read a few lines.

In 2008 when I was making work solely based on my local environment. I rode a bus many times to a major shopping centre. Each way on the bus took about an

hour, and again I gathered overheard conversations, writing them down as we travelled. This time I cut the letters from domestic linoleum (the floors of the bus were covered by it), and I installed these collected sentences as a discrete component, alongside the photographs in the exhibition. The conversations I overheard people having on public transport tended to be highly personal. I found it fascinating being in an intimate space with strangers yet hearing private details, unmediated.

When I was in the U.S.A. in 2009 (field trip one) I started to photographically document handwritten signs from shop windows, graffiti and even signs posted up in the windows of people’s houses, such as a double-storey house in San Francisco where every available window displayed an irate message from the tenant to the landlord. I then painted these signs in oil paint on canvases (I chose oil and canvas to elevate the text’s importance or ‘presence’), reproducing the author’s handwriting and message. Examples of the statements / signs included:

*Had to Pay Lawyer to File Law Suit Againsts Landlord (sic)*
*Tonight Jackpot Mega $31 Million Hey You Never Know*
*On All Problems of Life Palm $20 Walk In 416-551-6574*
*This Is Not A Toilet*
*Party’s Over!!! Fuck Wall ST!*
*Kill Homophobes Gay People Suck No Shit*

I enjoyed the humour and universality of these statements. They are very ordinary, typical things to which most people can relate to.

After much time spent producing photographs, using my hands with immediate materials is a way to rebel against scanners, computers and printers. It’s an important part of my practice. For this new body of work I didn’t collect any conversations or signs to use, but I had for a long while thought about using the phrase *Everything Happens for a Reason*. People often use this term to provide
18 - Carla Feltham
installation view from exhibition Mixed Business, 2007
colour photographs and cut carpet

19 - Carla Feltham
Installation view from exhibition, I'll Make My Own Way Home, 2007
cut linoleum and colour photographs
20 - Carla Feltham
installation view from exhibition, *The Revelator*, 2009
oil on canvas and framed colour photograph
comfort when things don’t make sense, when things go badly, or in the hope that something good will come out of a bad situation. For me it also has an obvious, if loose, spiritual or religious connection, for those who believe in a god or a religion, there are those who will similarly say, “It was God’s will” or “part of his plan,” again trying to offer comfort or reason in a situation that makes no sense. The statement *Everything Happens for a Reason* can provide comfort if you choose to think or believe in higher powers, or conversely it could provoke annoyance, especially in those given to a more existential view that often, things simply don’t make sense.

For many years I have visited cemeteries and photographed graves. I am particularly fascinated by the materials used at different times in history to make a grave: materials like iron, marble, tile and wood, which often reflect the taste of domestic architecture at the time they were made. The duality of love, care and then later neglect and ruin of graves really strikes me. For most of the sites, at least for a while, they will be visited and looked after, but then as time passes they are left to weather and decay, and then weeds, lichen and moss take over. I’ve also long made photographs of artificial flowers, left on the graves or that have blown away into the grass or a nearby fence. I enjoy the polarities of what a flower represents: they are given in times of love and celebration, and also in sadness and loss. The artificial flowers left at the gravesites are beautifully melancholic, over time fading in colour and slowly disintegrating under the sun, wind and rain. Even though artificial flowers domestically come in and out of fashion, you still see them in foyers of hotels and restaurants and even planted in hanging baskets out the front of people’s houses. They perhaps signify an attempt to retain an endless beauty, or at least do so in an economical low maintenance way.

Because I photograph graves and the artificial flowers left there I decided that I wanted to make the letters for the phrase out of Styrofoam, and then stuff them with artificial flowers, similarly to how you sometimes see the Styrofoam words
21 - Example of funeral flowers, used to form a word.

22 - Carla Feltham
Sandgate cemetery, NSW
colour photograph (documentation), 2011
“Grandpa” or “Mother” garlanded with flowers and placed on a casket or gravesite. The phrase has similarities to the duality of the flowers. I hope that the object and words will be seen not as bleak or sad, but rather quite beautiful, and that they will relate to my images because many of them speak of finding beauty or solace in the everyday.

ON THE WALL: INSTALLATION & READING OF IMAGES

An important aspect of my practice and artistic research is looking at modes of photographic installation, historically and in the present day. I’m especially interested in how contemporary photographers are able to create a diversified interpretation through an emphasis on various installation modes.

Photography is inherently an analytic discipline. Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects [my emphasis] a picture. A photographer standing before houses and streets and people and trees and artifacts of a culture imposes an order in the scene – simplifies the jumble by giving it structure.23

This observation by photographer Stephen Shore addresses the unique aspect of photography when working in the real world or working in ‘found-image’ mode. In making the image, you select and give structure to a particular vision, but it’s also necessary to carry this through when thinking about the presentation and installation of the work.

In 1972 Shore staged an exhibition of 300 images he had made while on an epic road trip across America. In a discussion of the installation of the work, he commented that:

...You raise a problem I had with the original show (American Surfaces) in 1972, which is that the pictures were shown as Kodak-printed snapshots, unmatted, unframed and pasted to the wall...I think for a lot of people who

entered the room it was like coloured wallpaper. So it is a difficult question, how to make sense of the work and show it most effectively.  

Shore’s analysis of this presentation illustrates how problematic and integral the installation of work is to its reading and interpretation. Small images can create an intimacy and force the viewer to come in closely to the work, while large-scale images allow the viewer distance to scan across and around, and perhaps imagine themselves in the physical space of the photograph. Framed images become almost a precious object, with a sheet of glass creating a barrier between it and the viewer, and the weight of the frame protecting the fragility of the paper. But an unframed image is exposed, vulnerable and unmediated, allowing the surface of the paper to be easily viewed.

Within the medium of photography there are literally dozens of choices to make before you begin, and then many more along the way. What equipment will be used, a small camera versus a large camera? Are you working outside or inside? Are you using people or no people, are you using analogue technologies or digital? Will you frame the prints or simply pin them to the wall, or indeed not print the photographs at all, letting them exist only in virtual space? These are just some of the more basic questions. All of the obvious and subtle choices say something about the way you like to work, and ultimately these decisions will affect the way the audience will respond to your images. For me the curation and the installation of imagery is just as important as the content of the photograph. It’s a crucial part of the reading of the image and an area on which I place a lot of emphasis.

Through time the accepted or fashionable way to present photographs and art in a gallery context has changed dramatically; from floor to ceiling ‘salon hangs’ of

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the early and mid twentieth century, to the present day, when the norm is to hang images left to right with a centre line. Work hung this way generally only allows you to read the images in one ordered, didactic fashion.

To present images in less conventional ways, as I do, disrupts a typical narrative and allows the viewer to use their conscious and unconscious judgement to attribute value, and create their own meaning and associations in a much freer way. In past bodies of work I have explored and experimented with various elements including framing, not framing, images having white or black printed borders, printing full-bleed to the edge of the paper, hanging large images next to much smaller images and using matte paper versus gloss paper. In terms of installation, I have also experimented with presenting work in various ways. In 2007 I exhibited a collection of seventeen colour photographs, in which each image was a different size (either landscape or portrait in orientation) and I pinned the images to the gallery wall in a haphazard grid. I worked with basic gridlines to begin with although this isn’t necessarily evident in the end result. I select the first image, perhaps the largest one or an image I consider to be intrinsic for all the others to flow from; I place it, and then work from there in positioning the other images. It’s incredibly important that the entire body of work is balanced and that each image works individually as well as collectively. The end result could almost be described as a ‘mind-map’. If the viewer is to take in the work they are forced to stand back and let their eye guide them as opposed to walking past left to right.

In 2009 I exhibited a body of work titled The Revelator as part of my Honours exhibition. The suite of five colour photographs was printed on silver rag paper and framed in dark brown wood. Each image was a different size and all but one had a printed border, while one was printed to the edge of the paper. Working in a similar way to earlier projects I decided on what size I thought each image should be rather than making them at standardised dimensions, as I think this adds dynamism and allows each image to convey the contained information to its
best potential. In the gallery space I spent the best part of a day moving the frames around on wires before I decided on a final hang and then placed them. For this installation the hang was not a grid but rather more of a lineal, lyrical hang as I placed one image at the standard centre line of 150cm, and the rest higher or lower and spaced either side according to how I thought they best related to each other. This method of installation isn’t something I strictly abide by for every body of work. It has to suit the content and the exhibition space, but pushing the boundaries and attempting to present work in a stimulating way that enhances the photographs is something I am always considering.

It’s a challenging way to work as it means there is only a certain amount of planning you are able to do prior to installation; the rest of the decision-making has to be done in-situ. You’re reacting to the physicality of the space rather than just anticipating the length of a white wall. For the past five years I have worked at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, and for two of those years I have worked on the installation team changing over exhibitions. This experience, coupled with my personal practice, has highlighted the importance of installation methods, how the positioning, sight lines and lighting affect the end interpretation of work. For my Masters exhibition titled *Preservation*, I will be making preliminary plans for a layout and installation, but as is characteristic for me I will be responding to being in the exhibition space with the work before I decide on what kind of hang will best suit the photographs. My priorities however evolve around the performative opportunities in engaging with the audience in the exploration of the multi-layered work.

In 2009 Australian photographer Trent Parke was commissioned by the Sydney Opera House to create a series of work that focused on presenting a ‘behind-the-scenes’ look at what goes on back stage. The work he produced titled *Please step quietly everyone can hear you* (2009), was exhibited at Stills photographic
23 - Trent Parke
Ballet Wardrobe Room, Opera Theatre
from the series Please step quietly everyone can hear you, 2008
pigment print, 100 x 122 cm
gallery Paddington, Sydney. The installation of this work was a marked departure for Parke. Previously all bodies of work had been exhibited at a uniform size and either in a lineal left to right fashion or in large stacked grids. For this work there was a mixture of colour and black and white images, a multitude of sizes, and they were pinned in a scattered fashion, climbing up and down the wall, with large individual images hung near clustered groupings. I think this installation fittingly complemented the subject matter, which was largely made up of interior shots balanced between highly minimal abstract images and photographs presenting spaces full of visual activity.

Contemporary photographers like Paul Graham and Wolfgang Tillmans are examples of artists who consider installation an essential component of their practice to be utilized and explored, and they therefore push the boundaries to create new potential for the reading of their work. Paul Graham exhibited a body of work at MoMA (Museum of Modern Art, New York) in 2009 called *A Shimmer of Possibility*, in which multiple sequences of images were each given a different treatment. Each sequence consisted of five to eight images of the one subject, and they were suggestive of cinematic stills, where perhaps only seconds had passed between each shot, but each individual frame was a unique size and scale and then hung in an askew line that vaguely resembled a musical score. The effect for me created movement and denied the viewer the chance to passively pass by as a typical hang might.

Wolfgang Tillmans has throughout his career presented his work in a fashion that resembles a giant pin-board. He uses the entire wall space and places framed and unframed work together, as well as images that are small to mammoth in size, evoking a gridded spider’s web. Like Graham, this method serves to disrupt a typical or directed narrative reading of the images. It allows the viewer to make looser connections to the images, and the differing scales let them move in

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24 - Wolfgang Tillmans
installation view, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2010

25 - Paul Graham
from the series A Simmer of Possibility, 2004-06
closer or step further back. Tillmans says of his installation method, “I am interested not in individual readings, but in conducting networks of images and meanings capable of reflecting the complexity of the subject”.

The installation of my work is often a curatorial process, much as is that of Tillmans. After printing and accumulating the photographs I have made over a period of time, I start to look through them for recurring motifs or the possibility of a loose visual narrative developing. This narrative is something I’m generally unaware of while photographing. Or more correctly, I don’t deliberately go seeking certain things; I’m drawn to them in a free-associative, perhaps unconscious fashion. On reflection I can start to see relationships developing between singular images as well as groups. Once I’ve decided upon the ‘keepers’, I then consider scale, trying to make sure that each image works individually while also being able to operate collectively.

While traditional hanging methods of photographs still have their place, I think also there is room to explore the impact that more experimental installations have, carefully considering how the content, scale, sequence and framing can work together to create a challenging presentation. While the end result may not always be entirely successful, I think this is a better outcome than always playing it safe.

TRACE

Documenting trace/s is a theme or motif that’s important to both my work and in the work of many photographers I look at. Whether it’s graffiti, debris, handwritten signs, lost items or carefully arranged objects, they play an integral role in signifying the presence of another human, an action or act that has passed.

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Whether it be intentional or unintentional, the evidence that remains has the potential to carry psychological freight as the ‘trace’, which once documented, memorialises past time. Australian art historian, curator and writer Helen Ennis describes photographic images of ‘trace’ as being concerned with paradoxical qualities. She asserts that at heart there is “a desire to represent the unrepresentable.” While agreeing that this visual trope is not a new concept in contemporary photography, Ennis goes on to question, “Why is it that photography is being brought into play to give shape to the immaterial? Why are artists currently concerned with making the absent present? What has absence itself come to represent?”

English artist and writer, David Campany, describes the resonance of trace in imagery:

*A photograph is an image that bears the mark of the real. The light that illuminates the world is the light that records its image. In this sense all photographs are traces. However the world itself contains traces or marks. A photograph of a trace is perhaps the opposite of the ‘decisive moment’. It is the moment after. It records the marks made by the world on the body and by the body on the world.*

The marks or traces that Campany describes can symbolically stand in for the absence of any direct human presence. The remaining evidence, a kind of scar or signifier of loss, bears witness to the vanished presence that the photographer has chosen to document. The notion of trace appears in the work of most of the photographers I have researched; Zoe Leonard’s images of shop fronts, Eugene Atget’s photographs of paths, Paul Graham’s documentation of graffiti in toilets, Alec Soth’s interior shots of people’s living spaces, William Eggleston’s image of shoes under a bed and Stephen Shore’s photographs of the food he ate while on road-trips. All contain varying levels of trace, which can be interpreted by the viewer if they choose to.

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27 Helen Ennis, *Traces*, Photofile, 2002, Australian Centre for Photography, Paddington, NSW, pg.3
28 *ibid.*, pg.4
In describing the images of Alan Cohen, produced for his book *On European Ground* (2001), which documented sites of major conflict of the twentieth century, (World War I trenches and where the Berlin Wall stood etc) Anne Ferran states:

*There are clues here, though not perhaps the kind you’d look for. There is nothing in them of the telling detail, the clue that would orient an individual viewer or ground them psychologically in the picture. Such details, the ones Roland Barthes wrote about as wounding and Walter Benjamin as searing, are consistently absent from these photographs, so much so that I begin to think that absence too must carry meaning.*

I have observed from conversations with viewers of my work that a similar quality of absence suffuses my photographs. Within a body of work (part of *Mixed Business* exhibition, 2007) I used an image of concrete rubble left and piled in a corner. The pile was, in reality, no taller than two feet, however because it was isolated many people thought that it was a huge stack, human height or more. Often a sense of scale or context is difficult to access, which forces the audience to scan about looking for clues as to what exactly is being depicted and why. Susan Sontag hypothesises that photographs have the ability to teach a new visual code, that they “enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe.” In this sense the photographer is ‘pointing’ to a scene or element and inviting the viewer to observe, perhaps finding the intended meaning or something entirely different.

Roland Barthes delineates two distinct elements within photographs. The studium is that which we recognise, those elements culturally and intuitively familiar to the viewer. Settings, actions, gestures, compositions, narratives, figures, light. The studium has an educative role. It tells us what is in the

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30 Anne Ferran, *Empty*, Photofile, 2002, Australian Centre for Photography, Paddington, NSW, pg.7
31 *ibid.* pg.7
26 - Carla Feltham
colour photograph on silver rag paper, dimensions variable
photograph, what it is of, and it usually discloses the photographer’s intent. It lies in the province of function: “to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire”.34

Barthes names the other integral element as the punctum, another Latin term, which means to puncture, and to punctuate. The punctum is that element which, deliberately or otherwise, agitates the studium.35 It may be that component or characteristic which makes the familiar strange, which pierces and cuts through to an unexpected emotional response, which produces a poignancy, that is unforeseen and fortuitous. Where it is present, a photograph can never be static under one’s gaze, as so many inevitably are.

Those photographs, which do not achieve that subtle beyond, are described as unary. A unary image may transform reality but not “double it (or) make it vacillate; no duality, no indirection”.36 The literal in these photographs may still traumatise, may still shout, or produce interest and affection, but where the punctum is not present, we receive, perceive and read, but no disturbance is evoked. The punctum is not necessarily the same for each individual. The provocative element will often depend more on the reader than the photograph itself, as its impact will generally be subjective. Different viewers will perceive different elements in the photograph as the most important, and they will often have varying emotional and intellectual responses. The resonance in a photograph, or lack thereof, is not fixed, embedded in the negative’s emulsion by either the design of the photographer or a serendipitous accident which transforms the ordinary into the intriguing. For Barthes, “it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there”.37

34 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida : reflections on photography, Vintage London, 1982, pg.28
35 ibid. pp 26-27
36 ibid. pp 40-41
37 ibid pg.55
QUIET PHOTOGRAPHS

I recently read an inspiring chapter in a book titled *The Pleasures of Good Photographs*, by author Gerry Badger, dedicated to the subject of quiet photography.\(^{38}\) It was the first time I had heard of photographs being described in this way, and it’s a topic that relates closely to my style and the photographic work I tend to be drawn to in others. Badger asserts that:

\begin{quote}
*The “quiet” photograph is a difficult notion to define with any exactitude, partly a question of style, more a question of voice. To begin with, it means essentially what it suggests, that the photographer’s voice is not of the hectoring kind, that his or her artistic persona from first to last is modest, self-effacing. The egotistical meditation of the determinedly expressive auteur is politely shunned.*\(^{39}\)
\end{quote}

In writing about the New Topographics School of the 1970s,\(^{40}\) American photographer Lewis Baltz pinpointed an indicative quality of the quiet photographer, when he described photographs that appear to be “without author or art”\(^{41}\). The quiet photographer focuses upon modest rather than grand subject matter, eschews quirky techniques and presents their work in an understated manner. I think most of my work could be described in this way. My imagery is seldom explicitly didactic and certainly not confrontational. It is indeed quiet; the singular images can stand individually, or collectively form a loose narrative or story that is open to the interpretation of the viewer who brings their own experiences and memories to them.

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\(^{39}\) *ibid.* pg.21

\(^{40}\) “New Topographics exhibition (1975) put forward two basic propositions. Firstly, the new generation of landscape photographers were concerned primarily with beauties found on the edge of town, at the junction between city & country, between man and nature. This group as opposed to the expressiveness of Ansel Adams adopted a low-key, deliberately neutral style, as anonymous as real-estate photography or Victorian topographic work.” Gerry Badger, *The Genius of Photography*, Quadrille Publishing, London, 2007, pg.150

THE FLÂNEUR

Charles Baudelaire wrote of the “painter of modern life” - the sense of the artist immersing themselves in the urban flow, architecture, crowds and shops, both observing from within the flow and standing outside, documenting, drawing on life itself, a person he referred to as the ‘flâneur’. Walter Benjamin, drawing on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, wrote many texts on the concept of the flâneur. Citing the flâneur as an emblematic figure of the urban, modern experience, Benjamin responded to Baudelaire’s poem saying,

For the first time with Baudelaire, Paris becomes the subject of lyric poetry. This poem is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The flâneur still stands on the threshold - of the metropolis as of the middle class.

Perhaps the contemporary photographer, when ‘on the road’, still embodies this idea of the flâneur.

Throughout my years of studying photography I have always been drawn to making images by wandering and travelling about in the world. However, because I have undertaken structured study and also through my own personal curiosity, I have explored many different ways of creating images: tableau vivants, dioramas, studio still lifes and staged photographs. But for me the greatest inspiration and excitement still comes from interacting with actual places within the urban, the suburban, and beyond. I walk, I look, I gather photographs.

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Susan Sontag proposes that “the photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller...adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world picturesque.” 45

Writers often allude to the practice of photographers such as Jeff Wall, Wolfgang Tillmans, Roy Arden and Stephen Shore as being comparable to Baudelaire’s idea of the “painter of modern life”. In Michael Fried’s text, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, he describes Jeff Wall’s preoccupation with the ordinary and commonplace. “For Wall, the importance of the everyday for modern art goes back at least to Baudelaire and the idea of the painting of modern life, another theme that Wall has spoken of in interviews, though mainly in earlier ones.” 46 Wall’s choice of subject matter frequently conveys these concerns or fascinations. Many titles of his works are indicative of this, such as Men Moving an Engine Block (2008), A Fight on the Sidewalk (1994), Doorpusher (1984), Man in Street (1995) and Pawnshop (2009).

The work of contemporary German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans (b.1968), is described by Professor Lane Relyea as also sharing a Baudelairian quality, “Tillmans has often been said to epitomize Baudelaire’s ideal “painter of modern life”. He has been applauded for faithfully documenting gritty social reality.” 47 Tillmans has been photographing his friends, domestic interiors, clubs and parties he visits and elements of his travels for twenty years. He juxtaposes the inherent beauty and formal qualities of objects, like the bright orange peel from a mandarin or scattered raspberries on a plate, with everyday reality like an image of a rat running down a gutter.

46 Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut 2008, pg.63
27 - Wolfgang Tillmans
Summer still life, 1995
c-type print, 181 x 238 cm
28 - Roy Arden
*Weeds*, 2001
archival inkjet print, 51 x 61 cm

29 - Roy Arden
*Vancouver, B.C.* 1995
chromogenic print, 151 x 190 cm
The term also appears in an appraisal of Canadian photographer Roy Arden’s (b. 1957) extensive body of work.

The pictures of shop windows, discarded chairs, antique clocks and architectural subjects; and the overall sense given by these Symbolist photographs of a flâneur’s pleasure in the city streets point to Baudelaire’s concept of the “painter of modern life”, to Atget as practitioner and to Benjamin as modernity’s philosopher. 48

And, inevitably, Stephen Shore’s influential photographic practice of more than forty years is viewed by Christy Lange through a similar prism:

Committed to the intrinsic qualities of photography, Shore doesn’t seek to transform the objects of everyday life through the camera’s lens, but rather to show them in their ordinariness. His version is unforgiving and faithfully realistic. True to Charles Baudelaire’s description of the “Painter of Modern Life.” 49

This flâneur’s approach, a way to identify and make photographs, and to make meaning, is as integral to my practice as it is to the work of other photographers from whom I draw inspiration. I walk, I look, I gather photographs. Franciscan monks had a saying, employed as they wandered through mediaeval Europe, meditating in their ceaseless quest for the true nature of God: Solvitur ambulando (it is solved by walking)50. My quest, too, is solved by walking.

48 Roy Arden, Roy Arden, edited by Nigel Prince, Published: Birmingham, Ikon Gallery, 2006, pg.9
PART TWO – THE MAKING
MAKING IMAGES

This section will look at the photographer travelling through landscape, making images as well as collecting and documenting trace elements. An often-cited motive for photographers exploring and documenting their immediate environment is to record the way we live now; to determine what ‘now’ looks like in terms of aesthetics, colours and mass consciousness. Photographer Stephen Shore is quoted as saying: One of the things I was interested in was, what does the age we are living in look like? It’s a question, or quest, that recurs in the work of many photographers including myself.

There are many different ways to make or ‘take’ a photographic image, and photographers draw on unique experiences and often individual methods to make their images. One could generally say photography can be made from two methodological perspectives: documenting elements of the real-world, which I will call ‘found’; or created from the imagination with complete artistic control, which I will call ‘constructed’. Within these two areas there are historical and contemporary examples of photographers whose work specifically draws on the tension between the two, or who seek to subversively blend or switch the roles.

Photographers who draw inspiration from the real or literal world tend to revel in drama, absurdity, chance interactions: people and situations that arise in everyday life. Travelling about on foot, bike, car, train or plane, moving through life documenting, collecting, accumulating an archive of evidence of things that have caught the eye. To work in this way you are relying largely on the serendipity of the random search, always carrying the knowledge that you must wander about seemingly aimlessly, all the while observing closely. This is a method that can be incredibly generous but also frustratingly fruitless. It’s about immersing yourself in an environment and being open to opportunity.

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Prominent contemporary examples of photographers whose primary mode of making images is by immersing themselves in the world and travelling through landscape, include English practitioner Paul Graham, as well as American William Eggleston. These photographers use travel not just as means but as method: roaming about allowing their curiosity and instinctive eye to lead them to environments and scenes. Writer David Chandler says of Paul Graham’s photographic wanderings:

He would drive, and stop, and walk, sometimes for a few minutes, at other times for hours, maintaining an instructed and intuitive itinerary, and photographing all the while, keeping restraint in mind, never dwelling too long on any one subject or being drawn too far beyond that initial point of fascination.  

This method is one I can relate to in a strong way. I have particular areas and suburbs not far from where I live that I visit frequently. I’ll drive there and then get out and go walking around, immersing myself in the environment, observing signage, shop windows, discarded objects and the way the light is falling at that particular time of day. These smaller towns and villages have a uniqueness you can’t find in newly built up areas with franchised retail outlets and housing estates.

Trace elements of human interaction, detritus or debris left behind, evidence, are of interest to me. I love to record the forgotten, weathered or discarded objects that were once important or meant something at some point, and have now been lost or cast aside. I am attracted to the humble materials that have been used to create a sign or shelter that are/were dearly looked after, that show traces or scars of use. David Chandler suggests that photography’s fascination with trace and evidence is a longstanding endeavour in stating that:

52 Paul Graham Archive website – Essay by David Chandler
Inscriptions and traces have held fascination for photographers since the inception of the medium. Mark-making is, after all, a form of primary evidence, the sign of something having taken place or the existence of an idea that is otherwise invisible and therefore enigmatic for the camera. For the many photographers who have made pictures of graffiti and naïve street markings – notably Brassai, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt and John Gutmann - the interest in this sense of the authentic, in primitive and vernacular forms, was also the tapping into what was considered to be a kind of mass consciousness, to the metabolism of urban life itself, and the surreal embedded in the everyday.  

This way of travelling through landscape, allowing yourself to be fully immersed and constantly looking, whether you are in a car or on foot, is genuinely thrilling. It is analogous to hunting or tracking, searching for things or scenes that you will have never witnessed before and you know will probably never exist again in quite the same way.

Many photographers speak of an almost endless impulse to document the times they live in as a motivation for their practice. There is a long established history within the medium of photographers documenting various landscapes that tend otherwise to be overlooked or ignored entirely, making scenes and observing scenarios that don’t fit into other genres such as photojournalism, commercial photography or amateur snapshots. Eugene Atget, a giant of the form, who will be discussed in more detail later, devoted much of his life around the dawn of the twentieth century to doing exactly that, so bequeathing to posterity the clearest vision of Paris during the Belle Epoque.

Subjects such as suburban housing estates, shopping centres, cemeteries and fast food chains, empty parking lots and crowds of people on streets, and discarded objects in public places are a few examples of aspects of life and

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53 Chandler, D. A Thing There Was That Mattered, Paul Graham & Michael Mack (eds.) Paul Graham, Steidlmack, Gottingen, 2009, pg.49
society that aren’t typically documented or recorded. The architecture, colour and shape of things in the world are ever-evolving and change so quickly that we seldom notice the shift. Details like the colours of cars, food packaging, styles of public advertising and what a new house looks like today are examples of our immediate environment that we move through, yet these elements would only ever accidentally appear within our own personal archive of photographs. They are happenstance, not subject. Photographer Robert Adams says, “Photography can always be new, because the surface of life keeps changing. Yes, photography like all the arts will go in seasons, but it is not a fad anymore than is life itself.” Here, Adams conveys the never-ending flow of life, and hence never-ending pool of inspiration from which to draw.

Photography is a medium in which, once the image is made, the document is historical and the moment has passed. Over time, the original meaning can change and stand for something new. When family snapshots are taken people focus on the smiling faces, activities or gifts depicted in the image, then in the future when looking at the image again we tend to dissect and become sentimental about the objects that form the background, remembering a certain stereo, couch or clothes as if looking at a newly opened time capsule. Susan Sontag asserts:

"Subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed touched with pathos. An ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer. A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are momento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability."

Sontag’s reflection reminds us of the shifting nature and meaning of a photographic image and how the medium uniquely presents this to an audience. There is potential, as recent history has proved time and time again (as is discussed next in the ‘Mirrors & Windows’ section regarding Robert Frank) for people to dismiss a photographer’s work or practice as simply banal, when in fact the artist is focusing on an area that otherwise would be entirely ignored, the possibility of a poignant and historically significant archive lost to the future.

**MIRRORS & WINDOWS**

Many photographers' sole obsession is to photograph their immediate environment in order to understand and translate it, while for others it’s the relative exoticism of somewhere else that draws them in. Is it easier to ‘see’ the familiar or the unknown for a photographer?

Within this genre of social landscape photography, some photographers choose to work for many decades or great lengths of time within their own community or family. The familiarity and existing relationships afford them access and an intimacy that they would otherwise be unable to achieve. They are an organic part of the scene, and so can operate relatively inconspicuously and in a manner that is unselfconscious.

American photographer Tina Barney (b.1945) for example, has spent decades recording and making informal portraits of her upper-class family and friends in New York and New England, delving deep into a rarefied milieu that she inhabits herself. Barney’s photographic style is part candid and part tableau. Her chosen subject matter explores two motifs in particular. Firstly, she records aspects of living a privileged existence (for example lusciously detailed images of somewhat baroque interiors), and secondly, portraits illustrating the interaction of family and

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friends. Barney explains the evident distance or strain that are at times present in her images. “When people say that there is a distance, a stiffness in my photographs, that the people look like they do not connect, my answer is, that this is the best that we can do. This inability to show physical affection is in our heritage.” 57 Being part of this upper echelon herself means that Barney is able to recognise the inherent body language and social dynamics that she describes when she says that a lack of physical warmth is part of her upbringing. Barney never feels like she is exploiting her subjects and is able to read the situation with innate and intimate knowledge. It is self-portraiture in many respects.

A predecessor of Barney’s who also photographed close to home is William Eggleston (b.1939). In 1964 Eggleston was living in Memphis, Tennessee. As a burgeoning photographer he formed the belief that he could only make meaningful work in Paris. Yet after travelling there (perhaps stifled by the pressure he had placed on himself, or by the city itself) he didn’t shoot a single frame. When he returned home he complained to his friend Tom Young “I don’t particularly like what’s around me”, to which Young responded, “This could be a good basis for taking images”, Eggleston mused, “You know what, that’s not a bad idea.” 58 From that point Eggleston reveled in exactly what was around him.

30 - Tina Barney
*Brocade Walls*, 2003
C-print, 79.8 x 100 cm

31 - Martin Parr
from the series *The Last Resort*, 1983-85
Chromogenic print, 50.8 x 61 cm
Eggleston has focused on photographically exploring his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee and his childhood home of Sumner, Mississippi, not so much examining his immediate family, but rather sifting nuanced elements from his surroundings. A child’s tricycle in a driveway. Accumulated dust under a bed. A hatchet sitting on a backyard barbecue. John Szarkowski says of Eggleston’s work: “It seems that the pictures reproduced here are about the photographer’s home, about his place, in both important meanings of the word. One might say about his identity.” 59 This comment reflects the potential for images made by the photographer to be as much an indirect self-portrait as a comment or observation about the exterior world they inhabit. Many photographers go full circle in the search for compelling subject matter: casting outwards in the belief that the most intense interest will be found in the unknown, only to find the most compelling material is right in front of them.

32 - William Eggleston
*Untitled*
execution date / print date: 1975
dye-transfer, 21.5 x 39 cm

33 - William Eggleston
*Untitled (Mississippi)*
execution date / print date: 1985
dye-transfer, 40.6 x 50.8 cm
I have in my practice challenged and experienced both modes of image making. In 2009 I visited America (field trip one) and spent most of my time split between Memphis and New York City. Memphis, particularly, was chosen somewhat in an act of homage to William Eggleston. I did experience an ease of ‘seeing’ as everything was new and interesting, and I was an outside observer able to be completely absorbed in walking and wandering and wondering, unencumbered by a sense of familiarity and the everyday commitments of home life. I’ve also made many bodies of work locally, shooting only close to my home. It is different, yet revelatory in its own way. It’s easier in the sense that you can revisit locations repeatedly over time, allowing a deeper examination of the landscape, and exciting because you are stopping and pausing rather than passing by as we heedlessly do again and again, and can discover things that are a direct part of your own world and community, heretofore hidden in plain sight. It feels like you are peeling back layers and reinterpreting the world of which you are a part.

Essayist Gerry Badger wrote about the dichotomy of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ as primary subject matter, when referring to an exhibition titled *Who’s Looking at the Family?* held at London’s Barbican Art Gallery in 1994.60

This exhibition identified a persistent trend in the late twentieth-century photography, where as a result of both serious questions regarding the medium’s ethics and socio-cultural factors, many photographers have chosen to retreat inward, to photograph only those communities they know, and are part of – where any charge of misrepresentation or intrusion is either invalid or unlikely. 61

I think this observation illustrates the duality and inherent problems of where and what a photographer chooses to shoot, especially when photographs depict individuals, groups or larger communities. It can be equally problematic to be ‘a

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34 - Richard Billingham
"Untitled"
from the series Ray's a Laugh, 1995
photograph on paper, 158 x 105 cm

35 - Robert Frank
Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey
from the series The Americans, 1955
silver gelatin print, 30.5 x 40.6 cm
part of the people you are photographing as it is to be a visitor. English photographer Martin Parr (b.1952) came to prominence with his breakthrough project, *Last Resort* (1983-86). This series focused on the once-popular holiday destination of New Brighton, situated in the mid north west of England. Parr’s images presented children with ice cream-covered faces, bins overflowing with rubbish and screaming babies in prams. Presenting a perhaps cynical portrayal of the dream family holiday, and not accidentally, a disquieting though amused critique of Margaret Thatcher’s new Britain. When asked if the criticism he received for this project affected him, Parr responded, “To an extent, I’m critiquing the problems of modern society, and not really the people in them. I’m critiquing Toryism, consumerism and tourism. They are all part of the Western world we live in and it seems bizarre to me not to photograph it.” Parr stands as an example where, despite being an insider, he isn’t beyond criticism. By having his lens on socio-political themes he is seen as cynical and unpatriotic by some, albeit by those who lack the ability to see the obvious humour and even affection in Parr’s approach.

Another example of a photographer working from ‘within’ is English artist Richard Billingham (b.1970) with his confronting series *Ray’s a Laugh* (1996), in which he unflinchingly photographed his alcoholic father and obese mother in their grimy council flat. Billingham could be potentially criticised for taking advantage of the subjects, if they weren’t in fact his own parents, who had at least implicit knowledge of the photographer’s intentions. The entire nature of the relationship between the subject and photographer is not always clear, yet even minimal information or knowledge influences how an audience perceives the work. Curator Peter Galassi says that, “What the picture doesn’t show us – how the photographer got here; his or her relationship, in the broadest sense, to the subject – shapes the character of what we see within the frame.”

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In 1955 Swiss photographer Robert Frank (b.1924) received a Guggenheim Fellowship grant (the first non-American to do so) and travelled across the U.S.A. embarking on an epic road trip documenting the fabric of American life. The evidence and imagery of this trip was distilled into what is now regarded as a seminal photographic book: *The Americans* (1958). His black and white photographs were ‘shoot-from-the-hip’ in style, sometimes framed askew and soft in focus, but always with content rather than technical perfection at the fore. While it is certainly not relentlessly pessimistic, the book has an undeniably downbeat, melancholic mood. He documented scenes such as passengers on a bus, a lonely jukebox and people gathered at a funeral wake. As a relative outsider, (he had lived in America on and off for the previous seven years), Frank reflected how he saw America at this time across all strata of society. This body of work was initially met with loathing and scathing criticism, seen to be a bleak, harsh and cynical representation of American life by someone who was himself an ‘outsider’. It is worth remembering the political context of the time the book was made and received; the cold war, McCarthyism, nuclear paranoia. *The Americans* was un-American.

Bruce Downes, editor of *Popular Photography*, detested the book, but recognized its force and published seven short reviews of it, including his own, under the

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66 “Robert Frank’s *The Americans* was first published on May 15, 1958 by Robert Delpire in Paris. It featured 83 of Frank’s photographs taken in America in 1955 and 1956, accompanied by writings in French about American political and social history selected by Alain Bosquet. Delpire’s *Les Américains* formed part of the *Encyclopédie essentielle* series, which presented foreign countries to a French audience. Each of Frank’s photographs in this edition is placed on a right-hand page, with the texts on the left-hand pages. The first English edition of *The Americans* was published in 1959 by Grove Press in New York. It presented the same photographs as the Delpire edition, however a text by Jack Kerouac replaced the French writings. The book begins with Kerouac’s introduction, followed by Frank’s photographs in the same sequence as the Delpire edition. On the left-hand pages are short captions from Frank, which describe the location.” http://www.steidlville.com/books/695-The-Americans.html/ [accessed: 7.8.2012]
general title “An Offbeat View of the U.S.A.” Of the seven opinions, only Mike Kinzer was sympathetic. The other reviews described the work as disclosing “a warped objectivity”, constituting “an attack on the United States”, “the images of…a joyless man who hates the country of his adoption”, and “a sad poem for sick people.”

American photographer and academic Tod Papageorge has pointed out that,

_Frank’s book, from an iconographic viewpoint, closely parallels Walker Evans’s masterpiece American Photographs, published two decades earlier. Although Evans’ work could not be said to be the favourite fare of the photo magazines, it was never attacked in those journals with the passion that Frank’s book elicited._

Papageorge’s assessment demonstrates that although Evans was also criticised for his work (in particular his _Let Us Now Praise Famous Men_ project from 1936 which I will discuss later) it was unparalleled to the opprobrium heaped upon Frank. One could speculate that this was at least partially because of Frank’s ‘outsider’ status as a foreigner. But of course, sometimes being an outsider is a valuable opportunity. Paul Graham (b.1956) spent decades making work in his homeland following a tradition and path carved out by predecessors like Walker Evans and Robert Frank. Having spent periods of time in America since 1998, Graham left London for New York permanently in 2002. Since making work in his newly adopted country he has noted that,

_ANYONE WHO COMES TO THE UNITED STATES WITH OPEN EYES CANNOT FAIL TO BE MOVED BY THE RACIAL/SOCIAL INEQUALITIES HERE. IT’S THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM. TO MAKE WORK HERE, AND NOT TAKE THAT INTO ACCOUNT SEEMS TO BEPlainly ridiculous, and it makes you part of the problem._

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68 ibid. pg.19
70 Edited by Paul Graham & Michael Mack; essays by David Chandler,
Graham’s arrival in the US happened during a turbulent time for the country. It included the post – 9/11 period of war and paranoia promoted by the neo-conservative regime of George W. Bush. Domestically, social inequality was increasingly drawn along racial lines, the economy was faltering and the division between rich and poor had never been so visibly evident.\textsuperscript{71} In response to this Graham created his most overtly political body of work, \textit{American Night}, created between 1998-2002.\textsuperscript{72} Super saturated colour photographs of pristine suburban houses with landscaped gardens are juxtaposed alongside semi-opaque images (the colour photograph is almost whitewashed, creating a sense of disorientation) of isolated figures of African-Americans standing or walking alongside the road in down and out neighbourhoods. The visual method of adding an obscuring opacity, a metaphor for the blindness of American society to the less fortunate, means the viewer must almost squint or look very closely to see what is happening, creating a tension in trying to discover what is hidden, or perhaps not there at all.

Graham’s trenchant observation expresses the potential dilemma faced by a social landscape photographer who is also a sojourning outsider or recent immigrant. He or she can perhaps see things with a unique clarity, or conversely be unable to see the full context of the situation they are witness to. Either way the photographer inevitably, both deliberately and unwittingly, conveys his own vision, building a visual hierarchy from elements of the world that must fit within his own personal framework.

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\textsuperscript{71} \textit{ibid.} pg.53
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\textsuperscript{72} \textit{ibid.} pg.249
\end{flushright}
36 - Paul Graham
American Night # 7 (large house with dodge) California, 2002
chromogenic print, 181.6 x 231.1 cm

37 - Paul Graham
American Night # 10 (man praying) Atlanta, 2002
chromogenic print, 181.6 x 231.1 cm
I BUILD THEREFORE I AM (AN ARTIST)

More than any other medium, a photograph tends to evoke questions of place: where was it taken; are the scenes or people depicted ‘real’ or constructed? Photographers who work by creating an imagined image are operating on an entirely different plane, in a directorial mode and with a different intention than to those who work with ‘found’ imagery. Within this realm all facets of the image can be controlled and tweaked so as to enable the photographer’s vision to come to the fore. Most or sometimes all aspects of the mise-en-scene, such as the use of a studio, lighting, models, costumes, facial expressions and props, come together to conjure an imagined vision. In recent decades photographers have increasingly blurred the lines between making an image derived from the real world, and intervening to create imagery that is entirely, or largely, fictional.

Photographer Jeff Wall’s (b.1946) work draws on the tension of both modes within photography, the ‘found’ and the ‘made’. “Wall now distinguishes between “documentary” and “cinematographic” photographs, the latter designation acknowledging the artist’s role in altering or setting up the scene to be photographed.” 73 Either way the construction of Wall’s images is highly calculated, and the treatment of each individual image reflects his method and vision, whether much of it is based in reality, or whether it is an ‘original’ creation. For example in his photograph View from an Apartment (2004), Wall spent almost a year developing the groundwork for the image,74 searching for the right apartment as his set, which meant he could have an exterior (through a large window) and interior view. He then gave a friend a budget to furnish and live in the apartment as her own. It was only after considerable time had passed that Wall made his image, and even then after meticulous preparation, the figures in the picture were not posed, but merely observed going about their day to day activity in the space. Wall teases out the dynamics of the image, saying that:

38 - Jeff Wall
*View from an apartment*, 2004-05
transparency in lightbox, 167 x 244 cm
I reject the idea I’m doing "staged photography". Every kind of behavior is equally real. Technically, the woman on the left is performing, but I don’t think it has any effect on what she looks like. Yes, she’s more directed, in that what she is doing was planned. I just wanted her to be walking away from her ironing, going somewhere. It didn't matter where.  

And despite all of the labour and intent, the end product may deliberately appear to be a candid photographic moment. Almost like a painter, he is starting with a blank canvas and filling it to create an end product he controls (almost) entirely.

Although this method of creation could be seen as being far removed from the history of traditional street photography and what Henri Cartier-Bresson termed the ‘decisive moment’, it’s an example of utilizing and drawing on the tension inherent in the photographer’s intervention in the image, raising questions of truth and reality, and how much they matter to the viewer. While Photographer Garry Winogrand’s axiom held that “There’s nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described”, often not knowing the ‘facts’ can be the most intriguing part.

Despite the great lengths of time Wall can put into creating an image, that effort is seldom reflected in the end product. His images can still appear to be a documentary photograph, a captured image of a scene he stumbled across. What is consistent is his fascination with the everyday: movement and labour, interactions between people and landscape. Writer Michael Fried affirms Wall’s continuing themes:

Wall’s involvement with absorption and with what, following Heidegger, I have been calling the worldhood of the world is closely related to his longstanding interest in the ordinary, the commonplace, or, his preferred term, the everyday, a topic that comes up frequently in his many interviews. For Wall, the importance of the everyday for modern art goes back at least to Baudelaire and the idea of the painting of modern life.  

77 Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before,
Even though over the years I have experimented with constructing images rather than finding them, now as then I am still inherently and primarily drawn to finding images by travelling through environments and landscapes. But this is not to say that there is no room for sometimes experimenting with degrees of control, in a similar fashion to Wall. In 2008 I made an image that was my first experimentation with creating a constructed photograph that included figures. It became one image in a series of eight (60 x 60cm) photographs titled, “I’ll Make My Own Way Home”. I had a vision of two figures, one being limply carried in the other’s arms, the body arching with head and feet towards the ground, depicting an almost pseudo-religious graphic. The two figures walk down a red dirt track (the woman being carried by a man) in a simple yet dramatic landscape of minimal scrub and a cloudy blue sky. When you view the image it’s difficult to tell if pain or pleasure is being conveyed, and I was pleased with the potential emotional ambiguity. This image sat within a body of work where all the other images were ‘found’ and non-figurative. This added to its potency, but also meant the audience were instantly drawn to it in the first instance, according to direct and indirect feedback I received. Perhaps it stood apart merely because of the figures, or perhaps because of the tension created, the inability to know how much was manufactured and how much was ‘found’. As with Wall’s work the audience may question what part was real and what part the photographer played in creating or intervening in the scene.

In 2010 photographer Paul Graham presented a paper titled The Unreasonable Apple at the first Museum of Modern Art Photography Forum. He opened his presentation by reflecting that:

>This month I read a review in a leading US Art Magazine of a Jeff Wall survey book, praising how he had distinguished himself from previous art

Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, pg.63

39 - Carla Feltham
Image from the series, *I’ll Make My Own Way Home*, 2008
colour photograph on silver rag paper, 60 x 60 cm
photography by “carefully constructing his pictures as provocative often open ended vignettes, instead of just snapping his surroundings.” Anyone who cares about photography’s unique and astonishing qualities as a medium should be insulted by such remarks, especially here, now, in 2010, in this country, in this city, which has embraced photography like no other. 79

This assertion clearly demonstrates the sense that despite the legacy of street photography and the shift from pure reportage to more personal explorations, ‘found’ photography can still be seen, by the unthinking or unimaginative, as less creative or less artistic than a constructed image that clearly shows the photographer’s intervention or evidence of a creative hand at play.

From its very beginnings the medium of photography has lent itself to the logics of the archive. It is a medium of the particular, but it is also a medium of collation, comparison and repetition. It has become an integral tool enabling the archives of the sciences, the legal system, education, medicine, industry, art history, news and the domestic family. Major museums have been repositioning archival images as art since the 1920s. The official canon of art photography, assembled and promoted in the mid-decades of the twentieth century, was pieced together from various sources. Alongside self-consciously made images as art, there were photographs made by professionals with artistic ambitions, for example art photojournalists such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. 80

Up until the 1970s, photographic representation of daily life was dominated by a model of image making that derived from reportage. The art-photojournalist emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as a figure moving between the editorial page, the photographic book and the gallery. Out of this phenomenon grew ‘street photography’, perhaps being the only genre specific to the medium. It had certainly become that for practitioners, writers and curators by the late 1950s and 1960s. Despite its ground-breaking imagery and easily identifiable perception

that it was what the medium is all about, street photography came to something of an end, in parallel with the decline of documentary practice in the early 1970s. While photography was marginalized by television and its impact on mass culture, in art it was being exploited by conceptualism’s explorations into the ideological indexing of documentation and the inherent qualities of photographic meaning. 81

IN-BETWEEN ZONES

Landscapes that fuse the city to the country are an environment unto themselves, and of particular fascination for me. The architecture and the fatigued functionality of various infrastructure (shops, houses and roads) have historically and contemporarily made them zones in which many photographers, including myself, revel. In many respects, by documenting the fringes of cities and small towns, photographers imbue their images with a political edge whether consciously or unconsciously. It is here that a sort of inter-tidal zone between the past and future of society is apparent. Change is either coming, is in the process of altering the landscape, or will never come; all outcomes which will produce fierce argument and economic and social dislocation. Often these small towns have a unique and nostalgic feel as they lack the homogenization of larger places. Locally, in close proximity to Newcastle, places like Weston, Argenton, Beresfield and Kurri Kurri are towns I find photographically inspiring.

I wander through scattered urban sprawl. These are shifting, ill-defined landscapes. I find industrial parks on the edge of town; now-vacant small farm lots that are rezoned for new building; degraded bush-land. There is an uneasy dissipation of the urban into the countryside, a kind of no-man’s land of highways, parking lots, scrubland, telegraph poles and overhead cables. Social landscape photographers are drawn to documenting elements that are more times than not overlooked. Canadian photographer Roy Arden’s (b.1957) work is

fully absorbed in this area of practice. Writer Nancy Tousley describes Arden’s immersion in his landscape:

*It is places like these, wherein all modern cities look the same, that the dynamics of change in late capitalism and the attendant entropy manifest themselves. Constantly in action, in and upon the landscape, these socio-economic forces leave their marks on the everyday in the overlooked, the unsightly and the formless. Arden’s photographs render these forces visible, intelligible. Driving the city in his car, he scouts locations in which to construct photographs that reveal the abstract operations of the economy.*

Arden combs his city of Vancouver and its edges documenting run-down houses, shops, overgrown weeds and homeless people’s makeshift dwellings. Shot with complete clarity and conviction, they allow the viewer to absorb the details and context of a landscape most would travel through but seldom take in. They certainly aren’t images attempting to depict beauty in a traditional sense, yet the photographer, by creating them, is in a sense implying a significance or importance that may or may not be shared by the viewer.

Writer Lucy Lippard posits in her text *The Lure of the Local,* 

that a sense of place and identity is lost through the homogenization of shops, petrol stations, planned suburbs and gated communities. Photographers who influence me are all in one way or another exploring the very fabric of these issues of the social landscape. The old and decayed is highlighted – shops, houses, vacant land, the unique and cherished oddity or object – and often juxtaposed with the new: stark, cold and shiny. Lippard states:

*Suburbs are neither here nor there. They have no centre. Neighbourhood grocery stores allowed inside suburban boundaries have little company. Light industry was banned to emphasize a residential image, thereby encouraging the commercial strips springing up on the outskirts of each*

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82 Roy Arden, *Roy Arden*, edited by Nigel Prince, Published: Birmingham, Ikon Gallery, 2006, pg.6
subdivision, which in turn further blurred the boundaries between one suburb and another. Independent of the city that spawned them, many aren’t even suburbs any more.  

The phenomenon that Lippard is describing is one that is also endemic here in Australia. Family-owned corner stores, independent butcher shops and newsagents that would have once catered to small residential areas have closed and made way for generic shopping centres, full of nationally and internationally franchised companies, that service larger suburban estates, which blend and merge together both aesthetically and topographically. In my practice I’m interested in photographically archiving precincts and shops that remain despite such sprawl and growth, and I’m drawn to the humbleness and inherent individuality that they retain.

There are large differences between the strata of housing and suburbs in America and Australia and thus in their representation by photographers. A sense of familiarity or context emanating from the image means the viewer is able to affix value or achieve a better understanding of what is being conveyed. Australian writer and academic Dr Chris McAuliffe points to a clear difference in sensibility and portrayal:

_Broadly speaking, international photography of the suburbs turns on such pairings as sterility and abstraction or on exercises in macabre social theatre. Australian photographers are not immune to such rhetoric but have shown a tendency towards more empathetic observation. They have tended to seek the ambiguous boundary between city and country rather than drawing a stark contrast between the two. And they take pleasure in engaging with suburban lifestyles on their terms rather than adopting a moralizing stance._  

85 Chris McAuliffe, _Suburbia Revisited_, Photofile No.69, Australian Centre for Photography, Paddington, NSW, 2003
40 - Trent Parke
Pinata
from the series *The Christmas Tree Bucket*, 2007
pigment print, 32 x 40 cm
McAuliffe points to a clear separation of moralizing and perhaps even endearment in terms of dealing with representations of suburbia. Australian photographers such as Trent Parke and Glenn Sloggett are not merely observers of the scenes they present of suburban Australia, but they are either directly a part of them or very close to them. Parke’s series *The Christmas Tree Bucket* (2006-2008), in which he documented the goings on over two family Christmases, is an exemplar of this. The images depict burnt sausages, children asleep on the floor, a victim of sunburn, the dead Christmas tree wilting in the lounge room. The photographs, with their candid depictions of summer holiday scenes and situations, convey a sense of humour and endearing empathy, and most Australians could easily relate to any number of the aspects being presented.
PART THREE – THE CONTEXT
THE PIVOTAL SHIFT: THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN SZARKOWSKI

John Szarkowski (1925-2007) was arguably the most influential figure in championing the medium of photography during the 1960s, 70s & 80s, particularly for artists that whose work didn’t fit neatly into documentary or fine art photography. Szarkowski’s curation of exhibitions and extended writing on the medium shifted perceptions and created opportunities for many new photographers’ work to be understood, reinterpreted and viewed by wider audiences.

Szarkowski himself was a practicing and published photographer when he was selected in 1962 by his predecessor Edward Steichen (1879-1973) to become the Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. During his almost three decades at the museum he created 85 exhibitions, travelling, solo and group shows, and wrote many publications including seminal texts such as *Looking at Photographs* (1972) and *The Photographer’s Eye* (1965).

He curated many groundbreaking and controversial exhibitions including *New Documents* (1967) and *Colour Photographs by William Eggleston* (1976), with

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87 "In 1947 Steichen gave up his own photography and became director of the department of photography at MOMA. Although he organized many exhibitions during his 15-year tenure, he felt that *The Family of Man* (1955) was his most important contribution. Conceived as a collective portrait, it included 503 photographs by 273 amateur and professional men and women from 68 countries. It could be argued that *The Family of Man* was a social document that found its way into the annals of art through the prestige and position of its curator, yet it became, in its travels throughout the world, one of the most popular exhibitions ever held." http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=5623 [accessed: 19.6.12]
its accompanying monograph William Eggleston’s Guide.90 New Documents introduced the work of Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, and their work clearly demonstrated what Szarkowski saw as a shift in the medium. During this time photographers were beginning to explore and present the immediate world they lived in with a greater personal vision, rather than within an established paradigm. Originators of a previous way of thinking about photography’s role were giants such as Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis91, photographers who were essentially reporting back the ills of the world-at-large and attempting to instigate change with their representations. In the wall text of the New Documents exhibition (1967) John Szarkowski suggested that:

_The aim of documentary photography had been to show what was wrong with the world as a way to generate interest in rectifying it. In the last decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach towards more personal ends. Their aim is not to reform life, but to know it._ 92

Colour Photographs by William Eggleston was an exhibition of approximately 75 colour images by the then unknown photographer Eggleston.93 The combination

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90 “Photographs by William Eggleston, one of the most accomplished photographers now working in colour, will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art from May 25 through to August 1 1976. The exhibition of approximately 75 prints has been installed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, who is also the author of a fully illustrated monograph, William Eggleston’s Guide, the Museum’s first publication in colour”.  

91 “Two urban photographers, Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940), took up the effort to explore the “wilderness” of the inner city and thereby establish documentary photography as a tool of social reform. Riis, a Danish immigrant and police reporter for the New York Tribune, continues to be revered for his late nineteenth-century expose of tenement conditions in New York’s Lower East Side and Lewis Hine has won lasting fame as a pictorial champion of working men and women and as a crusader against child labor during the progressive period. Riis and Hine shocked their contemporaries with dramatic images showing the human consequences of unchecked urban growth and industrial excess. Previous to their work, photos of the city celebrated urban architecture or provided perspectives that emphasized the city’s bustle, traffic, and commerce. Before the turn of the twentieth century, pictures of working and poor people were limited to portraits taken in photographic studios.”  


of colour prints and the content of the images infuriated many critics and caused controversy. At the time black and white photographs were seen as fine art, and colour was purely commercial or left for the amateur realm of ‘snap-shots’. Szarkowski’s choice and vision to present this work was attacked and “attracted additional attention, partly because Szarkowski had referred to Eggleston as the ‘inventor of colour photography’ in several interviews.” It was the first colour photography shown at MoMA, a decision that incensed the critics almost as much as the supposedly banal and vulgar subject matter. The loudest critical voice belonged to Hilton Kramer of the New York Times, who famously wrote: “Mr Szarkowski throws all caution to the winds and speaks of Mr Eggleston’s pictures as ‘perfect’. Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly.”

Kramer’s denunciation is an example of how Eggleston’s work was received at the time, and illustrates its polarizing affect. Along with other photographic books, such as Walker Evans’ American Photographs (1938) and Robert Frank’s The Americans (1958), which were highly criticized at the time of publication, William Eggleston’s Guide is now revered as being one of the most important photographic books of its generation.

As mentioned earlier, aside from being a photographer and curator of photography, Szarkowski was also an influential and pertinent writer on the medium. He wrote many catalogue essays and dedicated texts that reflected his thought-provoking observations on where photography had come from and where it was travelling. As with many practicing photographers who also write about the medium (for example Robert Adams & Paul Graham), I find their perspectives highly valuable and insightful because they are coming from an

97 Robert Frank, The Americans, Aperture, Millerton, New York, c1978
angle that’s multi-dimensional, having an affinity with the medium that is more than just theoretical.

_Mirrors & Windows: American Photography Since 1960 (1978)_98 is a catalogue written by Szarkowski, produced for an exhibition of the same name at MoMA. Szarkowski’s essay puts forward the concept of two fundamental strategies of the photographer, which he delineates as ‘Mirrors’ and ‘Windows’. Firstly, the ‘Mirror’ strategy focuses on self-expression, seen for example in the work of Alfred Steiglitz (1864-1946), photographs that reflect an extended though not literal portrait of the artist who created the work. Secondly, the ‘Window’ strategy, exemplified by Eugene Atget (1857-1927), which focuses on the photographer’s desire to know the world that immediately surrounds them.99 These are recurring themes for Szarkowski and ones that were present in exhibitions like the previously mentioned _New Documents_ and _William Eggleston’s Guide_.

Fellow photographer and writer Robert Adams (b.1937) says of Szarkowski’s influential writing:

_There are only a few people who seem able to write effectively at length about photographs. Among these few, John Szarkowski is so good that he may well be remembered as having been the equal or more of Stieglitz in his constructive influence on the medium._ 100

Szarkowski’s influence within the medium is frequently mentioned by writers and photographers in this field. His legacy is acknowledged as one that is overarching in both understanding the potential of the medium, and elevating the work of key photographers with unique personal visions. Those photographers, in turn, have influenced generations of practitioners after them, and thus the entire medium. English photographer Paul Graham states that:

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99 _ibid_. pg.11
Szarkowski at MoMA radicalized things for photographers by creating an artistic territory to operate in that wasn’t there before. Before, you were either an editorial photographer working for magazines in a semi-documentary style, or a fine-art photographer making pictures of landscapes or nudes or rocks. He swept aside that division and showed people like Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand who were making the most profound photographic work of our time, and though it looked like ‘documentary’ it was far more than that, and it didn’t belong in magazines but in museums. This was transformative: bringing ‘documentary style’ work into the highest museum of our country. It’s little appreciated, but was perhaps Szarkowski’s greatest gift: recognizing and defining new artistic space.  

Graham’s statement pinpoints Szarkowski’s influence and conveys his sense of conviction and determination at a time in the medium’s history when it needed it most. His legacy has enabled new generations of practitioners to carry on, challenge boundaries and carve out new territories.

EUGENE ATGET & WALKER EVANS

Frenchman Eugene Atget (1857-1927) and American Walker Evans (1903-1975) are two key figures who were fascinated by urban landscape and documented the times in which they lived with an obsessive sense of curiosity and passion.

Atget spent most of his life in Paris, and after several different careers, decided in 1890 to be a professional photographer, providing photographic documents (for example images of architecture and parklands) from which painters, artists, stage-designers and architects could work from. Atget’s legacy is an archive that, at the time of his death, held some 10,000 images.  

102 Jean-Claude Lemagny, Atget the Pioneer, Munich; London, Prestel, 2000, pg.7
Atget stands as a somewhat mysterious, even contentious, figure within the history of photography, largely because his motivating intentions with regard to his practice are highly debated. While his images of Paris parks, ornate buildings and shops can comfortably be seen as appropriate subjects for his photography business, other reoccurring motifs and fascinations stand out as seeming to be made purely for the satisfaction of Atget himself. Photographs of gentleman’s boots lined up outside a shop, slums, mannequins in shop windows and overgrown parklands were certainly not the norm for someone of his occupation, or indeed of any other practitioner of the day. Like my own images, Atget’s images seldom contained people, but rather traces, or indicators that they had been there. Walter Benjamin commented that “The images have been radically depopulated – “cleaned-out”, allowing the viewer to move around the image and even place themselves in it. Atget was known to distance himself from other photographers and artists, seeing his use of the medium as a purely utilitarian one.104 On the contentious subject of categorizing Atget’s work, Gerry Badger observes,

*Probably more time has been given over to musing about the “problem of Atget” than any other area of photographic studies. His work, his life, his photographic practice, and crucially, his intentions, have been at the cutting edge of criticism, certainly throughout the 1980s and 90s.*

In Paris, Atget lived a few doors down from surrealist artist Man Ray, and, at this time American photographer Berenice Abbott was Ray’s studio assistant. Ray introduced Abbott to Atget’s work. Shortly before Atget’s death in 1927 Abbott befriended the photographer, even making a portrait of him just days before his passing. After Atget’s death his closest friend, Andre Calmettes, who had been entrusted with his estate, had sold around 2,000 negatives, before allowing

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103 Helen Westgeest, *Take Place: photography and place from multiple perspectives* Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009, pg.92
Abbott to buy the remainder. In June 1928 Abbott shipped Atget’s glass plate negatives to New York and began to promote his work, a tireless quest that lasted decades. She was the driving force behind the first monograph of Atget to be published in 1930, and she widely exhibited and wrote about the importance of his work. In 1968 she sold her collection of Atget’s work to the Museum of Modern Art, entrusting them to carry on the legacy of his imagery and to present it to new generations. John Szarkowski said of Atget: “What Eugene Atget was, without doubt, was a photographer: part hunter, part historian, part artisan, magpie, teacher, taxonomist and poet. The body of work he produced in his thirty working years provides perhaps the best example of what a photographer might be.” I think this comment encapsulates Atget’s practice, and the very qualities that Szarkowski describes are present in all of the photographer’s work I draw inspiration from. Atget, in a very real sense, preserved the disappearing, rapidly modernising Paris of the fin-de-siècle. Contemporary inheritors of his legacy (such as Stephen Shore, Zoe Leonard, Trent Parke and Alec Soth) do equally important work. They create poignant archives of all the overlooked, changed and transient elements of life, when others are focusing on documenting the very personal or greater world issues.

Atget was known to be an influence for photographer Walker Evans. He was introduced to his work by Abbott when visiting her apartment in New York in 1929. Evans strove for clean, stripped back, straight and unromantic photographs, and Atget’s work especially appealed to him on that level. Evans said:

> A document has use, whereas art is really useless…I’m sometimes called a ‘documentary photographer’ but…a man operating under that
definition could take a certain sly pleasure in that disguise. Very often I’m doing one thing when I’m thought to be doing another. ¹¹⁰

Like Atget, Evans documented urban streets, shop fronts, domestic interiors, and public signage. In the early 1930s he photographed primarily in New York but he also travelled to places such as Louisiana, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Mississippi. In the summer of 1936 Evans and writer James Agee were sent on an assignment by Fortune magazine to create a story about the conditions of sharecropper tenant families in the south during The Depression.¹¹¹ They travelled to Hale County, Alabama and spent several weeks with three near-destitute tenant-farmer families there. Although the story for Fortune magazine never ran, the work they produced was eventually (after five years seeking a publisher) turned into a seminal book titled Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941).¹¹² After its initial print run of 600, the book wasn’t re-published until 1960, which is when it found a widespread audience, becoming a talisman of the Depression for people who had not experienced it for themselves.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Vicki Goldberg (ed), Photography in Print, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1988 pg.364
¹¹¹ During the Great Depression, Fortune developed a reputation for its social conscience, for Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White’s color photographs, and for a team of writers including James Agee, Archibald MacLeish, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Alfred Kazin, hired specifically for their writing abilities. http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/print/fortune/background.html [accessed: 18.7.2012]
¹¹³ ibid. pg.25
41 - Eugene Atget
*Naturaliste, rue de L'Ecole-de-Medecine, 1926*

42 - Eugene Atget
*Marche des Carmes, place Maubert, 1911*
Bibliotheque historique de la ville de
43 - Walker Evans
Bedroom, Burroughs Family Cabin, Hale County, Alabama, 1936
gelatin silver print, 24.2 x 19.6 cm

44 - Walker Evans
Outdoor Advertising, Florida, 1934
vintage silver gelatin print, 17.7 x 20.7 cm
The book featured Agee’s descriptions of the houses the families lived in, the clothes they wore, the food they ate and the work they carried out. The text was written in a very factual, dispassionate, observational way, almost as if detailing the scene of a crime. Evans’ accompanying photographs shared similar qualities. Although he did make portraits of the individuals, they were largely full frontal, closely framed, highly detailed images, somewhat devoid of environmental context, while the interior images of the house were devoid of people, focusing instead on the humble objects contained within: the kitchen, with a jug and a frying pan hanging on the wall, the fireplace in the bedroom with a small clock and mirror sitting on the mantelpiece, a towel hanging from a hook with a small bowl on a ledge next to it. The objects documented are able to convey a sense of the owner’s existence, by illustrating the selection, care, maintenance and position in which the objects are placed. Even with the distance of time, as is the case with Evan’s imagery; the viewer is still able to imagine a life lived with these objects. In many ways these images are archaeological archives, recording a way of life that otherwise may have been lost to history.

Evans bought his first camera in 1928. He hoped it would be a vehicle that would enable him to express himself, after frustrated attempts at becoming a writer. In 1938 the Museum of Modern Art recognized Evans’ work and vision, presenting its first solo exhibition of photography at the museum titled Walker Evans: American Photographs. Nearly two-thirds of the photographs in the exhibition were images he had shot during his trips to the South in 1935-1936. The exhibition produced an accompanying book, American Photographs, which, despite its age, has gone on to influence younger generations of photographers, and remains as relevant as ever. Richard Benson, Dean of the School of Art at Yale, notes that:

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Evans rescued entire realms of American life from being undervalued and overlooked. Down-and-out buildings and orphaned architecture, scattershot letters on hand-painted signs, orderly garages and jumbled-up barbershops, empty streets, junkyards, abandoned cars, and worn-out faces had few pretensions to the status of subject matter before Evans took them on. When no one else was looking, he recognized or maybe even invented the dignity of anonymous objects and modest achievements.  

These are ideas, themes and motifs that carry on through to contemporary photographers including myself. There is intrinsic value in this kind of work and it should be recognised as a worthwhile endeavour not only for the artist, but also for the audience.

WILLIAM EGGLESTON & STEPHEN SHORE

In May 1976 under the curatorial direction of John Szarkowski, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented its first exhibition of colour photography. The exhibition was simply titled Colour Photographs by William Eggleston. The exhibition sharply divided audiences and critics because of its seemingly banal content, and because by exhibiting colour photographs the most prestigious art institution in America was heralding a new era of the medium, essentially stating that they now recognized colour photography as art. As mentioned earlier, this did not sit well with much of the conservative art establishment or the wider public.

Eggleston turned his photographic gaze to the simple, even underwhelming things. He was drawn to the quotidian, disregarded and vernacular. In many ways he shot the very objects, events and emotions that were deliberately

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excluded from photography or deemed not significant enough to be recorded. His method and ethic are conveyed in his assertion that “I had this notion of what I called a democratic way of looking around: that nothing was more important or less important.”  

He made images of things such as parked cars, a supermarket worker pushing trolleys, the contents of a domestic freezer and food sitting on a dinner table. His photographs sometimes have people in them and sometimes not. If they do they aren’t strictly a portrait of the person but more an image of a figure in the context of an interior / exterior landscape. Eudora Welty wrote in the introduction to Eggleston’s book *The Democratic Forest* (1989) that:

> It is human existence that remains at the heart of his photographs. ... The human being – the perpetrator of or the victim or the abandoner of what we see before us – is the reason why these photographs of place have their power to move and disturb us; they always let us know that the human being is the reason they were made.118

Eggleston continues to practice and his influence on the medium has been far reaching. His work has significantly changed how other photographers view their surroundings and what they choose to reflect, but it has also affected everyday people who have seen his imagery. His work creates an appreciation for all of the small cumulative elements within life, things that aren’t traditionally sign-posted as beautiful or special.

While Eggleston’s early practice was predominantly centred on his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee and his childhood home of Sumner, Mississippi, a contemporary of his, photographer Stephen Shore (b.1947), embarked on road trips across the U.S. creating a photographic journal of his travels.

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118 *ibid.* pg.253
In 1972 aged 25, Shore set out on his first photographic road-trip from his home in Manhattan, New York, to Amarillo, Texas. He documented the food he ate, the hotels he stayed in, the petrol stations he stopped at and of course the long sweeping roads he travelled on. This journey followed the path of a well-established American tradition. However, his treatment and observations of the subject matter are uniquely his. Shore’s photographs are un-ironic and don’t present any hints of superiority or criticism. Photographer Hilla Becher has said of his work, “What interests me in Shore’s photography is precisely the fact that he can show the American world, everyday urban reality, without having a bad conscience. While here in Germany there was reluctance to show aspects of the recent past.” Shore was able to do so and refresh a genre, much as previous photographers like Walker Evans and Robert Frank had carved out a path out on which to travel further.

After he returned from his road-trip in 1972 Shore printed some 300 (8 x 13cm) photographs and exhibited them at Light Gallery, New York City. At this time Shore admitted the audience was decidedly underwhelmed: “I was going into an area that I knew nobody had an interest in.” A short time later Shore’s work appeared in what is now seen as a historically significant group exhibition of photographers. In 1975 at George Eastman House, New York, Shore was the only colour photographer included in an exhibition titled New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered landscape. The exhibition pinpointed new trends

120 ibid, pg.109
121 References to New Topographics — the exhibition and the style — abound in photographic practices, exhibitions, and histories. “New Topographics Photography” remains a category for artbook listings and “New Topographics” is the name of an active group on Flickr, displaying “work that shows human activity and interaction within the landscape.” In recent years The New Yorker has described “New Topographics” as “a distinct sort of landscape photography that combined a documentarian’s clear-eyed sobriety with an artist’s aesthetic discipline” and The New York Times noted the Eastman House exhibition “put this movement on the map.”
45 - Stephen Shore
Perrine, Florida, November 11, 1977
from the series *Uncommon Places*
colour photograph, 51 x 61 cm

46 - Stephen Shore
Horseshoe Bend Motel, Lovell, Wyoming, July 16, 1963
from the series *Uncommon Places*
colour photograph, 51 x 61 cm
and explorations into landscape photography, a genre that was newly addressing the use of land, man’s impact and visible traces left upon it.

Shore and Eggleston are examples of American photographers that broke new ground in the ‘social documentary’ or perhaps ‘social landscape’ area of photography that I work in, and are a continued source of inspiration. Both photographers suffered from intense criticism and had their work labelled as banal and insignificant, yet over time went on to receive acclaim and recognition for creating timely bodies of work that reflected unique aspects of their culture and time.

**ALEC SOTH & PAUL GRAHAM**

Alec Soth (b.1969) is a contemporary American photographer working prolifically in the field of social landscape photography. After formative years of study and experimentation, his first major project was *Sleeping By The Mississippi* (2004). He had been photographing along the Mississippi River since college, and as he had in past projects he devised a loose framework to provide focus. “The idea was that one picture would lead to the next. I might photograph a chicken, then a short order cook making eggs.” While making these pictures he began to think that the river itself could function as a metaphor for that kind of wandering. “If you look at a map, the river doesn’t go strictly north to south, it carves a crazy path all over the place. That is really what I wanted to do – just wander.” Soth spent a four-year period intermittently revisiting and travelling by car along the Mississippi from his hometown in Minnesota. He focused on small towns and dwellings and the people that inhabit them.

He shot this journey on film using a large and cumbersome 8 x 10 field camera and tripod, and would only ever shoot one or two images of particular scene, as

122 Alec Soth, *Sleeping By The Mississippi*, Steidl, Göttingen, Germany, 2004
the negative sheets were so costly. This format makes Soth’s images highly
detailed and luscious in colour. In many ways they are the antithesis of a Robert
Frank ‘shoot from the hip’ photograph, but the clarity which comes with the
format and the care of composition obviously echoes the style of Atget, Evans
and Shore. Also, because of the slow, methodical nature of the process
necessary to shoot with a large format camera, when his photographs include a
person it is with their full knowledge and consent, a kind of collaboration. The
ability to approach people is a process which Soth has said has taken him a
great deal of time to master. He was initially painfully shy, but in overcoming this
Soth has gained access to his subject’s lives and most intimate spaces. He has
also noted that because of the equipment he uses it can take about ten minutes
to set up the shot. He is physically metres away from his subject, hidden under a
black cloth, and in the meantime, while the subject is waiting, the photographer
and subject are usually chatting, and they become relaxed and oblivious to the
camera.

Sleeping By The Mississippi’s subject matter is quite diverse. We move from
images of a Reverend’s bedroom, to a portrait of a mother and daughter, old
painted sign writing, prison workers tilling land, and the river itself. The diversified
content of the project is not unlike Walker Evans’ images some 70 years earlier,
but of course Soth’s work is peopled with, and contains all the details and the
look and feel of life now. Soth explicitly makes the connection: “Most of my
photographic education has come from American publications, [and] as a
consequence, I'm neck deep in the Walker Evans tradition”.

His subsequent projects are also held together within a framework that gives
direction to his free-associative wanderings. His body of work NIAGARA (2006)

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125 Siri Enberg, From here to there : Alec Soth’s America, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis / ; texts
by Geoff Dyer ... [et al.] Minneapolis, Minn. :Walker Art Center, c2010 pg.106
126 ibid. pg.47
127 ibid. pg.106
128 Siri Enberg, From here to there : Alec Soth’s America, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis / ; texts
by Geoff Dyer ... [et al.] Minneapolis, Minn. :Walker Art Center, c2010 pg.45
47 - Alec Soth
Charles, Vasa, Minnesota
from the series, Sleeping By the Mississippi, 2002
chromogenic print, 76 x 61 cm

48 -Alec Soth
The Reverend and Margaret’s bedroom
from the series, Sleeping By the Mississippi, 2002
chromogenic print, 61 x 76 cm
was shot in and around Niagara Falls, and explored themes of love and
desperation juxtaposed against the literal and metaphorical backdrop of the falls
themselves. People stand by the vast and powerful body of water to get married,
but more despairing individuals visit the same place to take their own lives. *The
Last Days of W* (2008) follows in the footsteps of William Eggleston’s *Election
Eve* (1976). Eggleston travelled to Jimmy Carter’s hometown of Plains,
Georgia in Sumter County to document the city and produce timely images in the
lead up to a Presidential Election. Soth, 30 years later, brought together a
collection of images that present a portrait of average America during the end of
George W. Bush’s presidency. Soth’s images, amongst other things, depict
pawnbrokers, tent cities, religious iconography and the armed forces. Soth
doesn’t consider his work political or documentary in nature, but fellow
photographer Paul Graham’s work can’t help but be seen as portraying a more
sharply focused socio-political edge.

Paul Graham (b.1956) is a contemporary English photographer also working in
the area of social landscape. He has been working since the early 1980s creating
bodies of work which explore specific elements of the social fabric that surrounds
him. On the subject of style and the area in which he practices, Graham asserts:

> Photography for and of itself – photographs taken from the world as it is –
> are misunderstood as a collection of random observations and lucky
> moments, or muddled up with photojournalism, or tarred with a semi-
> derogatory ‘documentary’ tag.  

Graham’s project *A1 – The Great North Road* (1981-1982) involved him revisiting
the route his family took for their annual holiday in his childhood, a drive from
London, heading north through the country to Edinburgh. Photographs of the
road, truck-stop cafes, people waiting at a bus stop and the landscape that
nestles the road either side appear in this work. As with Soth, the concept of

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129 Siri Enberg, *From here to there : Alec Soth’s America*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis / ; texts by Geoff Dyer ... [et al.] Minneapolis, Minn. :Walker Art Center, c2010 pg.109
131 http://www.paulgrahamarchive.com/writings_by.html [accessed: 1.7.12]
embarking on a photographic road trip was not unique, but each photographer brings to it their own vision and curiosities, so the end result will always be different.

After many projects made in Britain and Europe, Graham began to work in America in the late 1990s. His two most recent projects are *American Night* (1998-2002) and *A Shimmer of Possibility* (2004-2006). Both bodies of work were created from Graham’s journeys travelling around the country by car. Writer David Chandler describes Graham’s process of wandering as:

*His journeys were directionless meanderings, northwards, southwards, often heading out across the country and then circling back. Routes were taken at random, roads driven along to a point and then a turning; cities visited and left, or not visited at all, just passed by on the fringes where highways intersect and suggest another story.*

*American Night* takes on themes of a socio-political nature, more consciously so than most other photographers (see previous discussion of Graham in *Mirrors and Windows*). Graham juxtaposes images of down and out African American people walking on the street with photographs of pristine suburban houses, landscaped gardens and two new cars parked in the driveway. They are emblematic documents that undermine an image of the all American dream and illustrate the chasm between the spheres of society. Writer Russell Ferguson articulates Graham’s stance within the medium:

*Graham is quite clear that this area between the document and formalism is where he, too, wants to work. His interest is in “the point where they coalesce. That’s where photography is so powerful. And it’s not a small area; it’s a huge area, that can still be pushed, chipped away at, refined.*
Graham believes that within this area of photography (not strictly document and not strictly fine art) there is plenty of scope and work to be done. It’s a philosophy akin to the work John Szarkowski was championing in the 1960s. Graham has written and spoken at length about the still-inherent misunderstandings in the art world - that this work is easy, that all the photographer has to do is be at the right place at the right time and just point and shoot.

Both Soth and Graham aim to show aspects of life and society that surround us all, often unnoticed, the people you pass by and the landscapes you pass through fleetingly. Their interest lies in the obvious and regional differences that are so often overlooked or taken for granted. It’s not the war-torn far-away lands or beautiful exotic locations that they seek, but rather the prosaic, but often poetic world they inhabit. The time and care they take to wander through and observe closely produces documents that enable an audience to also pause and reflect, if they choose to.

**ZOE LEONARD**

Zoe Leonard (b.1961) is an American photographer who has documented her changing Manhattan neighbourhood since the mid 1980s. One particular strand of this practice is her examination of small independent ‘mom and pop’ shops that have closed to make way for franchised business, coffee shops, barbers, clothing stores and even Kodak photo labs. Her images are devoid of people and rather focus on the structure, signage and detritus left, the trace elements of what was there. Similarly to French photographer Eugene Atget, who photographed the streets and shops of Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, Leonard has been documenting the changing face of the city that she inhabits at the turn of the twenty-first century. The driving force behind her practice has been described as following “the traces and scars of the world in order to understand the
49 - Zoe Leonard
Havemeyer Street, Brooklyn
from the series, Analogue, 2001

c-print, 28 x 28 cm

50 - Zoe Leonard
Fort Portal Market, Uganda
from the series, Analogue, 2004

c-print, 28 x 28 cm
structures of the world, to comprehend the essence of past and present, space and time, existential and social relativity”. In doing this, photographically creating work in an attempt to better understand the world she lives in, Leonard is by default, if not intentionally, pulling together an archive in which other people, viewers, are invited to do the same. Leonard’s epic body of work Analogue (1998-2007) contains around 400 images edited down from an archive of some 10,000 photographs she shot with an old Rolleiflex camera. Analogue examines the shops and wares presented in her neighbourhood, which stand as documents of vanished realities and moments or eras past. Within this work Leonard also photographed giant bundles of clothes on streets in Brooklyn that were bound for the secondary market of Kampala, Uganda. In 2004 Leonard travelled to Uganda and photographed the very goods that were bundled in her neighbourhood, now being sold at markets by the side of the road: shoes, shirts and pants modestly presented on tarpaulin or strung up on makeshift shacks. Of her work at large, Leonard cites several motives:

I’m recording a number of different intersecting themes. The central theme is that I’m trying to make a portrait of us as a society at this moment in time and what our objects and urban landscape say about us. It’s a kind of archaeology – an attempt to understand who we are and what we care about as a society.

Photography has always lent itself to the archive, to being able to record evidence of existence, and like Leonard, I enjoy the archaeological elements to the practice. Within my imagery as there is in hers, there are tiny details that are present and offer clues to the viewer. A scene is frozen that otherwise would seldom be observed or afforded the time to pause and meditate on exactly what

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136 Urs Stahel (Edited By), Zoe Leonard: photographs, Fotomuseum Winterthur / [authors, Elisabeth Lebovici and Svetlana Alpers ; concept, Urs Stahel, Trix Wetter, Zoe Leonard ; translations, Ishbel Flett, Elise Nussbaum], Gottingen, Steidl, London Thames & Hudson (distributor), 2007, pg.17
is present. The images inevitably reflect what ‘our time’ looks like now, the signage, the goods for sale, the food vendors and the choices consumers make.

As with Alec Soth and Paul Graham, Leonard is highlighting a very small area that relates to her immediate world and landscape, one she is familiar with and able to revisit over time. Leonard’s work isn’t solely presented in a purely documentary mode: there are subtle nuances at play; consumerism, loss and architecture that allow and beckon the viewer to glean information and relate to them in a broader context, more so than just a didactic story with a singular narrative. While researching my topic I have realised that this area of practice is dominated by male photographers, but like those photographers I am heavily influenced by, my concerns are of a broader, humanistic scope, and bending to the narrower concerns of gender politics in this exegesis would be somewhat irrelevant.
CONCLUSION

In this exegesis, I have outlined, through my body of research, various theoretical and practical approaches that have motivated my works of art. In gaining a better understanding of “on-the-road” photography I have focused my practical efforts on photography and installation. I have created a collection of images, which illustrate unique aspects of landscapes and environments I have encountered while travelling on the road. The installation of my work is also intrinsically linked to research I have done in this area, and aims to heighten the audiences interpretation of the images. I have discussed my methodology, exploring the differences between three field trips, (to the U.S.A as an ‘outsider’, to the far west of N.S.W as an observer of the nearly familiar and around my own locality of the familiar) in which I immersed myself in an environment, walking and driving around collecting imagery.

Themes explored that impact upon my work have included notions of trace, how trace can reveal a wealth of information for the viewer the flaneur how an observer can place themselves both outside and within the flow of life to glean poignant information about humanities existence, quiet photography how this style of photography allows a viewer to ‘enter’ and participate in a static image and social landscape photography looking at how practitioners hone in on a specific theme or area - projects which are uncommissioned and conducted purely out of their own curiosity and drive and create a valuable archive for the future.

In journeying and travelling, one element I have focused on is trace. Trace marks or trace (graffiti, debris, handwritten signs or lost items) can symbolically stand in for the absence of any direct human presence. The remaining evidence, a kind of scar or signifier of loss, bears witness to the vanished presence the photographer has chosen to document. David Campany’s writing pinpoints that a photograph of a trace is perhaps the opposite of the ‘decisive moment’ and that it records marks made on the body and the body on the world. This element is present in my work
and other historical bodies of work by photographers such as William Eggleston
and Stephen Shore, and they stand as important archival markers of time.

I have referenced Roland Barthes’ theory of two distinctive elements present in a
photograph - the ‘punctum’ (the component which makes the familiar strange,
perhaps inducing an unexpected emotional response) and the ‘studium’
culturally what the viewer can easily recognise settings, actions, gestures).
Many social-landscape photographs could easily be described as ‘quiet’ (one of
the ways I see my work). In this sense, Barthes’ studium is present but the
punctum is entirely in the hands of the viewer. Gerry Badger described the
quality as essentially the image-maker’s voice being quiet and not of the
hectoring kind, that the artist’s persona is modest and self-effacing. In my work
and the work of other photographers I have drawn upon, this quietness is
present.

Throughout my years of studying photography I have always been drawn to
making images by wandering and travelling. For me the greatest inspiration and
excitement still comes from interacting with actual places within the urban,
suburban and beyond. In looking at Charles Baudelaire’s writing through the lens
of Walter Benjamin I draw a link from my own methodology to that of
Baudelaire’s “painter of modern life”. The sense of the artist immersing
themselves in urban flow, architecture, crowds, shops both observing and
standing in the flow drawing on life itself. He called this figure the flaneur, an
emblematic figure of the urban, modern experience. The images contained in
Preservation have been made from sharing such an experience, from observing
and placing myself in the environments and landscapes in the hope of actively
recording a flow of life.

In my work I have looked at and pinpointed the liminal zones of cities – the
margins, the spaces in which they lose form and peter-out. As I have noted,
Marc Auge theorises and considers that the nature of modern car travel has
greatly diminished these liminal experiences, experiences that a traveler may
have encountered and, that with the advent of freeways and motorways, the small towns and points of interest that weren't necessarily sign-posted but rather were open to be individually discovered are now completely bypassed. The sense of ambling and the opportunity to find hidden points of interest along the way to an end destination has been erased.

In this context I have analyzed photographers such as Paul Graham and Ray Arden, who travel through landscape to source and create their imagery as well as drawing parallels with my own field trips close to home and abroad. Based on John Szarkowski’s concept of ‘mirrors’ and ‘windows’, I have explored with historical and contemporary practitioners the question of whether it is easier, or more valid to document one’s own immediate environment, culture or community, or conversely is it easier to be the ‘outsider’ looking through a ‘window’?

Similarly, I have drawn on the work of Lucy Lippard, who has written about how the loss of place and identity can occur through the homogenization of shops, petrol stations, planned suburbs and gated communities. Photographers who influence me are all in one way or another exploring the very fabric of these issues of the social landscape. The old and decayed are highlighted – shops, houses, vacant land, the unique and cherished oddity or object – and often juxtaposed with the new: stark, cold and shiny. My work has also aimed to present the inherent quirks and uniquely particular landscapes present in smaller, regional areas yet to be swallowed up by such homogenization.

The period of time that I have spent researching and making work for Preservation: Resonance of the Actual has cemented and confirmed for me the value of my instinctual desire to explore, to examine, to photograph the real world and present it for the possible consideration of an audience that in turn consider the seemingly familiar world around them anew.

I drive, I walk, I pause, I photograph, I move on.
A journey is a sequence of choices. What governs these choices? Why, in my larger journey, have I been driven to pursue the photography of journeying? What drew my eye inexorably to those influential photographers – Atget, Evans, Frank, Eggleston, Shore, Graham, Parr, Leonard, Soth, Parke, Sloggett – who have inspired and guided me? Would I have taken the same paths without having had the chance to reflect upon their journeying? Would I be here, now?

It is an impossible question to answer. My journeying has been a sequence of choices that extends back far beyond even the point where I first considered taking up photography. There are major intersections and crossroads, and many thousands of smaller ones, right down to where I point my camera; what precise instant I fire the shutter.

As I write, the journey is not yet at the end. How will I display my photographs and the other parts of the installation in the gallery space? There are many choices yet to be made, which cannot be made until I’m in the room. It’s best not to over-think, to over-prepare for the journey. You must let happenstance guide you, you must be open to possibility, to alternative, to accident, to serendipity, as I have tried to be along the journey thus far, and as I wish to be in the future, on further journeys, as I drive, walk, pause, photograph. And move on.

I believe my exegesis has made an original contribution to academic research in the area of social-landscape photography, bringing together solid grounding and references to the history of the practice whilst presenting the possibility of this genre being explored and expanded more thoroughly in an Australian context by a female practitioner.

While conducting research into ‘on-the-road’ photography, two interesting points emerged; the first was my increasing awareness that this mode of photography or social-landscape documentation was both historically and currently practiced far more in America than Australia. Secondly, that this genre of photography is
almost exclusively represented by male photographers. Within the scope of a larger research project, I think these two issues warrant thorough investigation and analysis. Why, given that Australia was settled and is populated much further afield than just the coastline is there very little documentation of life in these other areas via art photography? Also, given Australia’s strong cultural ties to the U.S.A, why haven’t we emulated their seeming fascination with social-landscape photography? It would be intriguing and worthwhile to be able to pinpoint any archives created by female Australian photographers which haven’t been published or exhibited, and if not, why not? These questions open up new territory for future researches, including myself.
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